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# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME XXVII NUMBER 2 NEW SERIES 2006

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## FAREWELL TO THE GRADUATES

Professionalism and Its Limits

IAIN R. TORRANCE

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The Counterempire of God:  
Postcolonialism and John

FERNANDO F. SEGOVIA

On the Doctrine of Atonement

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A Reflection on Christian Witness and Persecution

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All correspondence should be addressed to Stephen D. Crocco, Editor, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, P.O. Box 821, Princeton, NJ 08542-0803; e-mail: [seminary.bulletin@ptsem.edu](mailto:seminary.bulletin@ptsem.edu).

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## Editor's Note

While this issue of the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* was being prepared, the fifth anniversary of 9/11 came and went. I remember that fateful Tuesday morning in 2001, sitting in my office talking to two members of the Library staff. They told me about a plane crashing into one of the World Trade Center towers. For those fleeting moments we were agonizing over a horrible *accident*. A short while later, glued to a tiny television set in Erdman Hall, we realized it was no accident. I remember later that morning climbing to the top of the Luce Library tower looking to the northeast for signs of smoke from the burning buildings. Five years already! May justice and peace increase in our world in the next five years!

On another front, in five years we will be on the doorstep of Princeton Theological Seminary's bicentenary celebration in 2012. At their worst, such celebrations are occasions for self-congratulation and inward looking. At their best, however, significant anniversaries are occasions for looking back and grappling with the institutional heritage that influences us so deeply, whether or not we realize it.

Princeton Seminary has an interesting, important, and often debated history. The question is, will we move forward self-consciously and in critical debt to that heritage, or will we be ignorant of the people, events, and books that shaped Princeton into the most influential Protestant seminary in the world? Like it or not, that heritage has a lot to say about who we are now and where we are headed as an institution. The impact of Princeton Seminary on the church and the world has been and continues to be immense. And the potential to be a force for good in the future is staggering.

In the issues ahead, the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* will continue to publish the lectures, sermons, and addresses that help to make the Seminary such a remarkable place. The *Bulletin* will also continue to publish "Princetoniana" to remind us that this institution has a history that continues to give powerful shape to who we are and why we do what we do.

STEPHEN D. CROCCO  
EDITOR



# Professionalism and Its Limits

by IAIN R. TORRANCE

*President Iain R. Torrance delivered this farewell to the graduates during the Seminary Commencement exercises on May 13, 2006, in the Princeton University Chapel.*

“I have called you friends” John 15.15.

I congratulate you with all my heart. You are graduates of one of the greatest theological schools in the world. You have earned your degrees in classroom, seminar, precept, library, and field education, through essay and examination. You are now alumni or alumnae. Though no longer studying here, you are permanent members of the Princeton Seminary community. You are welcome visitors returning to a place where you already belong. The resources of the library are open to you and will always remain so. I look forward to seeing you again.

When you leave this chapel, a series of relationships change. No longer will you be students. Faculty and staff, I hope, will be seen as friends. There is a glad renegotiation of who you are. For many of you, this is only the first stage in a series of renegotiations. For many, ordination will follow and with it, profound changes in the depth and extent of responsibility. You will receive new charisms or return to previous ones. God has called you and God will uphold you.

But there are human dimensions as well. What is the boundary between friendship and professionalism? When is it appropriate to step back and when is it permissible to become complicit and partisan? Very many of you already have addressed or soon will address the issue of pastoral confidentiality in one of its various forms. Each kind of absolutism raises its own challenges. This is no exception. One view, as no doubt you know, is that pastoral confidentiality is a permitted form of partisan aid. It is beneficial to society and the making of community that certain people—those who are sick, those in deep distress, those who are guilty and require the fullest range of dispassionate advice—are provided with a level of assistance not accorded to others. But all of this has to remain within limits or deeper values are threatened. For example, it is widely agreed that no one may collude in sheltering the abuser of a child. And there are other critical circumstances that are almost as obvious and that can seem to call into question the credibility of the offer of protection and support. The puzzle then is: When ought one to cross the line?

I suggest that much of the mind-set behind that question is the burning need to specify everything. For those who think like that, much of education is the elaboration of just that specificity, that is, *when* exactly to do *what* in an airtight kind of way. I suggest to you that this is futile in the world of the twenty-first century into which you graduate.

To challenge that mind-set, I want to turn to Andrew Walls, who from 1997 to 2001 was guest professor of ecumenics and mission research at our seminary. Mark Noll has said of him that “no one has written with greater wisdom about what it means for the *Western* Christian religion to become the *global* Christian religion.” In a recent study, Andrew Walls looked at “Christian Scholarship and the Demographic Transformation of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> His purpose was to take account of the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century, more than 80 percent of professing Christians lived in Europe and North America.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, “well over half of the world’s Christians live[d] in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific.”<sup>3</sup> By this century’s end, he suggests that two-thirds of the world’s Christians may be living in the southern continents. But he is talking not only about numbers. He is talking about enormous changes in the nature and quality of Christian believing. The Christianity of the West and the northern hemisphere, Walls argues, is largely the Christianity of the European Enlightenment. I am one who certainly sees the values of the Enlightenment, but, as Walls argues, it characteristically tended to draw a sharp divide between the material world that we see and the world of the spirit. There were “identifiable crossing places: the incarnation, the resurrection, revelation, prayer, and perhaps miracles.”<sup>4</sup> Walls’s bold thesis is that Western Christianity, now faltering and fractious, may rediscover itself and be redeemed through exposure to the faith of the southern hemisphere.

He may well be right, but let’s take his idea and turn it in a different direction. The Enlightenment disposed not only of miracles but also of casuistry, wisdom, and, most of all, moral intuition. These were replaced by the categorical imperative and the calculus of utilitarianism. I am not convinced that either will ultimately be of much help to those of you who enter ministerial practice and seek help in drawing the boundary between the pastoral and the personal, between the role of the friend and the role of the

<sup>1</sup> Rodney L. Petersen, with Nancy M. Rourke, eds., *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 166–183.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

official. Especially today we have need of a Christian morality that is neither polarizing nor vacuous.

One of my friends is Herbert Kerrigan, who is one of the most successful criminal defense attorneys in Britain. He once drove me from Edinburgh to Glasgow and navigated from one murder scene to another. We have been friends for a long time. In 1975, a stage in the civil war in Angola ended. A group of mercenaries was rounded up and put on trial for their lives. Bert Kerrigan was one of two or three international attorneys who volunteered their services so that the prisoners could have a fair trial. He believes fervently in justice. I remember asking him how he could control his feelings in a situation when the stakes were so high. He told me: "Whatever you do, you must not personally become involved." There is one extreme for you. This may be good for steadyng the nerves of a trial attorney, but if you practice ministry with that degree of emotional distance, you will fail.

Here is another case: on the 6th of July 1988, the largest oil platform in the North Sea blew up. There was an inferno 350 feet high, and 167 people died. It was a matter of national anguish, and at the subsequent memorial service, one of the officiating pastors broke down and wept. This was an understandable and human act. Jesus wept. Yet my sense is that if you regularly conduct ministry with that degree of exposure, then you will be crushed and you will fail.

This is a graduating class that has not been untouched by loss. On the day I arrived in August 2004, Scott Schuller died. He was in every sense an extraordinary person, remarkable in his ability to inspire and to create community across different groups. That was his gift. His absence is palpable and his life will always mark those of you who knew him.

After 9/11 the British ambassador to the United States delivered a message to the people of New York from Queen Elizabeth. He ended with her words: "Grief is the price we pay for love." These words are now engraved in stone at St. Thomas Church in New York City.

Herein, I believe, is the key to Christian living. We cannot be inured from hard decision-making either through overinvolvement or underinvolvement. That is not how *Christian* professionalism is benchmarked. A participation in the love of God enables us to steer a path between the judicial and the sentimental. The practice of love distinguishes us from the worthy but distancing ethics of the Enlightenment. In your ministries, be steeped in God's love and display it to others without cost or moralizing. By refusing division and by persisting in love, with God's blessing we may hold together the Presbyterian denomination, of which this Seminary is a part, in all the struggles of its General Assembly meeting in Birmingham. May God bless all of you.

# The Counterempire of God: Postcolonialism and John

by FERNANDO F. SEGOVIA

*Dr. Fernando F. Segovia is Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Vanderbilt University, where he has been since 1984, and is a past president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States. He is coeditor with Stephen D. Moore of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections (2005). As the Seminary's 2006 Alexander Thompson lecturer, Dr. Segovia spoke on March 2, 2006, at the Mackay Campus Center.*

The concept of a postcolonial approach to understanding early Christianity and its texts might strike biblical critics in general as being both familiar and unfamiliar. The term “postcolonial,” in and of itself, should prove no stranger, although, I would argue, the operative frame of reference for understanding it will vary among critics. The designation as a whole, however, with its deployment of the term to describe the discipline, and thus to signify a particular mode of interpretation, might prove baffling—perhaps intriguing, perhaps unsettling, but certainly unexpected. A word of explanation regarding such a mixed reaction to the term, therefore, is in order.

It is not difficult to account for the sensation of familiarity. For most biblical critics, regardless of methodological or theoretical persuasion, the word “postcolonial” will evoke thoughts of empires and colonies while further conveying, by means of the temporal prefix, a sense of termination and distance. It calls to mind a sense of imperialism and colonialism as a thing of the past, a phenomenon now largely vanished and altogether remote. More than likely, such mention will evoke two different types of responses, depending on which side of a certain generational divide the critic stands. This divide, I would posit, spans the mid- to late 1970s. This was, to be sure, a fateful time for the discipline in general, as criticism began to undergo fundamental changes not only in method and theory but also in visage and voice. These were the years when the discipline began to look beyond traditional historical studies to literary studies and social studies for orientation and support. They were also the years when the discipline began to count among its ranks growing numbers of aliens outside of its long-standing Western and male base—women from the West as well as men and women from both the non-Western world and ethnic/racial minorities in the West. At this same time, the framework of reference for understanding imperialism and colonialism underwent a significant change as well, from historical experience to historical reference. For critics on the far side of the divide, the

imperial-colonial phenomenon primarily represents a living memory—a witnessed story. Those on the near side see it as a past event—an object for study.

Thus, among the older generations of critics—those who recall the times of reconstruction and expansion following the Second World War, who witnessed the emergence of a Cold War between capitalism and communism, or who lived through the social and cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s—the term will no doubt bring back memories of independence movements and liberation struggles in the non-Western world. These events began soon after the conclusion of that war, within the world of the British Empire at the formation of India and Pakistan in 1948, and then spread relentlessly through Africa and the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Similarly, among the younger generations—those who saw the Cold War come to an end through the collapse of the socialist block of nations and the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, who rejoiced in a brief period of geopolitical utopianism when the triumph of liberal democracy was seen as ushering in the end of history and untold dividends were anticipated from supposedly superfluous military budgets, or who watched as the forces of terrorism unleashed havoc throughout the globe—the term would probably bring to mind a discursive new movement at work in the academy. This movement, which would eventually come to be known as postcolonial studies, was formally initiated within the discipline of literary studies in the late 1970s, and in the ensuing decades, it swiftly spread across a variety of fields.

The element of unfamiliarity can be readily explained as well. Most critics, on both sides of the divide, are initially likely to find the rubric “postcolonial biblical criticism” enigmatic. What might the postcolonial, whether as a historical or discursive movement, have to do with biblical interpretation? Here, however, a contrast—by no means absolute—may be drawn between Western and non-Western critics. The designation proved especially appealing to and forthcoming among the recent newcomers from the non-Western world or from non-Western ethnic/racial minorities in the West. Why?

I believe the explanation is that for such critics, unlike for most of their Western counterparts, the imperial-colonial phenomenon remained largely a thing of the present. They did not regard imperialism and colonialism as being historical, vanished and remote, but rather as enduring and pervasive, although transmogrified. These critics viewed the imperial-colonial formations of yesteryear, consisting of direct political and military control of the periphery by the center, being dependent upon indirect social and cultural control, with special emphasis on the economic sphere. Moreover, such

critics were also very aware of a new imperial-colonial formation, as the United States evolved from a superpower of the post-World War era into the hyperpower of the post-Cold War period. From a discursive perspective, they saw the postcolonial lens as being applicable to biblical studies as well, given not only its focus of inquiry (the study of texts from other imperial-colonial formations) but also its historical trajectory (its emergence and formation at the core of the Western imperial-colonial formations from the nineteenth into the twentieth century). Indeed, it is largely from among such quarters that postcolonial biblical criticism entered the theoretical and methodological repertoire of the discipline in the latter half of the 1990s, although it soon became a major area of interest for Western critics as well.

Now, ten years later, it would be fair to say that this new critical approach is present everywhere. In this presentation I bring together postcolonial criticism and Johannine studies. I first examine the approach in general and then proceed to a reading of the Gospel of John from this critical perspective.

#### *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Problematic, *Origins*, Parameters*

Where and how does postcolonial criticism fit within the discipline? In approaching this question, it is helpful to begin with an overview of the discipline's major concerns and interests. These include: retrieving silenced voices in texts and exposing dominant voices in interpretation; exposing oppressive voices in texts and their ramifications in interpretation; foregrounding the political in texts and interpretations; challenging dominant scholarship by calling attention to empire and related issues in texts and interpretations; contesting the presuppositions, convictions, and practices of colonialism in interpretation; destabilizing established scholarship by opting for the vernacular; opening up interpretive space for the voices of the once-colonized; framing texts, reading strategies, and interpretations within the ambit of colonial relations; and commitment to social change.

At the same time, given the scope envisioned for such criticism, a series of important caveats have surfaced: to mind the intricacies introduced by culture, race, class, and gender in the colonial situation; to acknowledge the complexities of colonial contacts; and to move beyond binarism into hybridity. Postcolonial criticism thus revolves around texts and interpretations, dominance and resistance, and the politics of the imperial and the colonial. Postcolonial criticism further involves attention to layering and intersections. Such concerns and interests readily situate postcolonial criticism within the realm of ideological criticism.

*Postcolonial Biblical Criticism and Ideological Criticism*

It would be inaccurate to say that it was only by way of postcolonial criticism that the question of the imperial/colonial was introduced into the discipline. Such a claim would be tantamount to arguing that prior to the advent of literary and sociocultural criticism there had been no focus on the literary features or the social and cultural dimensions of texts among critics, or that prior to the emergence of feminist and liberation criticism there had been no attention to matters of gender and class in criticism. The question is not *whether* such features and dimensions had been addressed but rather *how*. What literary criticism and sociocultural criticism, as well as feminist and liberation criticism, brought into the discipline was a combination of sustained systematic analysis of the specific focus in question and recourse to an established and ongoing body of work, both theoretical and applied. It involved, then, a mixture of concentrated rather than scattered attention and theorized rather than impressionistic discussion, or in other words, interdisciplinary inquiry involving literary studies, social studies, feminist studies, economic studies, and biblical studies. The same holds true of postcolonial criticism.

Without question, the relationships between ancient Israel and its various imperial masters or early Christianity and the Roman Empire have always been a topic of critical discussion. Scholarship has certainly dealt with various dynamics of the imperial formations in question as context for the texts, analyzed the positions of the different texts with respect to such formations, and pursued the ramifications of such frameworks and responses for the groups in question. The question of *how* these issues have been addressed, however, has not so much concerned an amassing of a wealth of details or unstructured reflections on relationships but has rather concentrated on how its singularity of focus and intensity of analysis have changed—it has to do with consideration of problems concerning an unequal relationship of power.

As such, postcolonial criticism forms part of the array of ideological approaches that entered the discipline since its fundamental transition in the mid-1970s. All such approaches foreground and theorize a relationship involving domination and subordination—unequal relationships of power. To begin with, as the discipline moved from within itself and began to look toward literary criticism and sociocultural analysis for anchor and guidance, certain pressures from without made themselves felt as well. With the influx of women scholars came a focus on gender and gender relations—the beginnings of feminist criticism. With the advent of non-Western scholars came a focus on economics and social class—the beginnings of liberation criticism.

Subsequently, in the 1980s, as the discipline moved beyond formalism in both the literary and the sociocultural domains and entered the realm of cultural studies, further pressures from without affected it. With the advent of minority scholars came a focus on race and ethnicity—the beginnings of minority criticism; with the entry of gay and lesbian scholars came a focus on sexuality and sexual orientation—the beginnings of queer criticism. In the 1990s, as cultural studies expanded and affected all aspects of the discipline, a further focus on imperialism and colonialism came to the fore, initially propelled to a significant degree by minority and non-Western scholars. Thus, postcolonial criticism may be seen as problematizing an unequal relationship of power, a relationship of geopolitical domination and subordination.

Such problematization more than accounts for the major concerns and interests expressed from the beginning and outlined earlier. Such problematization also should recall the caveat of imbrication mentioned earlier: postcolonial criticism should proceed with due attention to the interrelationships and complexities at work in the colonial interchange. In foregrounding and theorizing the geopolitical, therefore, postcolonial criticism should not be considered in isolation from other unequal relationships of power but rather in dialogue with feminist and liberation as well as minority and queer criticisms. No less would be asked, *mutatis mutandis*, of any of these other criticisms: none should proceed without a sense of the geopolitical—and one another. Thus, while postcolonial criticism's singular focus on the imperial/colonial and its intense analysis through postcolonial studies apply, both must be properly nuanced throughout by gender, economics, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation—and any other dimension of human existence, such as the educational or the religious—in order to avoid the facile collapse of all categories into the one binomial of imperialism and colonialism.

### *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies*

Why does this problematization enter the discipline precisely when it does, in the mid- to late 1990s? The answer, I would suggest, is at least twofold. From the outside, critics such as Susan VanZanten Gallagher and Laura E. Donaldson bring the problematic to biblical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> From the inside,

<sup>1</sup> Susan VanZanten Gallagher, ed., *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1994). While concerned with the relationship between the Bible and the postcolonial, this edited volume does not deal with biblical criticism in particular. Its focus is on the conflicted legacy of Christianity in colonialism as seen through the theme of justice in both postcolonial and biblical literatures. Laura E. Donaldson, ed., *Semeia 75: Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1975).

a group of scholars came to the subject through their discourse of postcolonialism.<sup>2</sup> These were critics who had already been active in pursuing the issue of social location in interpretation, most with particular reference to the global context of the non-Western world or the local context of ethnic/racial minorities in the West. For an adequate understanding of postcolonial biblical criticism, therefore, a proper sense of postcolonial studies is in order. This is no easy matter given the broad range of positions and the intensity of debate over such studies. Here, however, a few salient observations suffice to provide a basic and informed acquaintance with its history, meaning, and scope—all by way of introduction to a guiding program for application in biblical criticism.

*Disciplinary Trajectory.* A narrative of origins makes for a prudent point of departure. Where does postcolonial studies begin? The answer is at once straightforward and problematic. On the one hand, the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 is generally marked as the point of origin.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, such precise identification and dating tend to isolate such studies from various preceding concerns and developments.

Said's analysis of the juncture of power and discourse in the West's representation of the Orient, with its view of the Orient as the "Other"—static, enigmatic, inferior—providing the rationale for political conquest and domination, leads to the formation of what is initially characterized as "colonial discourse theory." In this critical enterprise, primarily undertaken at first within literary studies and under the influence of various poststructuralist influences, the name and work of Said are joined eventually by those of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.<sup>4</sup> These three figures

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See especially her introduction, "Postcolonialism and Biblical Reading: An Introduction" (pp. 1–14). Donaldson, based at the time in the University of Iowa, had already published an influential volume on the intersection of gender, race, and colonialism (*Decolourizing Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire Building* [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1992]).

<sup>2</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. I and vol. II: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Segovia and Tolbert, *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Bhabha's literary essays, which he started writing in the early 1980s, are brought together in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Spivak's literary essays date from the mid-1980s and are brought together in various volumes: Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Sarah Harasym, ed., *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993). A collection of her most important studies and introductions to her work may be found in Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, eds., *The Spivak Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

constitute the core of what eventually became known as “postcolonial discourse” as this critical movement expanded across the disciplinary spectrum through the 1980s and 1990s. As such, they become the primary object of attention in treatments of the field, the requisite centers of reference in scholarly developments, and the principal targets of attack in critical discussions. In this process of taking account, expanding boundaries, and calling to task, the core figures and their publications are joined by an ever-growing list of names and works analyzing, extending, and revising the postcolonial angle of inquiry in many new directions.

With the unfolding of this disciplinary path and corpus, a number of exclusionary side effects grew increasingly evident. First, this movement, given its close theoretical links with poststructuralist thinking, became curiously separated from the anticolonial struggles and writings of the 1940s through the 1960s. Thus, insufficient dialogue was established with such figures as Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi—to mention but a few. Second, given its overriding concern for cultural production, the movement remained strangely removed from analysis of the material matrix. As a result, the long-standing analysis of imperialism and colonialism within the Marxist tradition was largely bypassed. Lastly, despite the movement’s consuming attention to the world of the British Empire, it remained curiously divorced from other such formations, most noticeably perhaps in terms of the anti-colonial writings and struggles in the Americas from the beginning of the nineteenth century through the end of the twentieth century. One looks in vain, therefore, for any sort of critical contact with figures from the franco-phone, lusophone, and hispanophone world of Latin America. The emergence of postcolonial studies stands, therefore, as both clear and muddled, understandable and incomprehensible, acceptable and questionable—all at once and inescapably so. This problematic readily extends as well to both the meaning and the scope of these studies.<sup>5</sup>

*Disciplinary Object.* The question of object or meaning involves the definition of postcolonial criticism. Needless to say, the various components of such a definition reveal a highly diverse and conflicted spectrum of positions. With respect to the project of postcolonial biblical criticism, the following options within the spectrum prove, in my view, especially pertinent.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive analysis of the meaning and scope of postcolonial studies, see “Mapping the Postcolonial Optic in Biblical Criticism,” in Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (London: T&T Clark, 2005): 23–78.

- Regarding the term “postcolonial” itself, its denotation of what-comes-after may be approached from the psychological or social perspective of “conscientization”—the realization and problematization of a geopolitical relationship of domination and subordination, regardless of existing historical and political conditions.
- On the meaning of imperialism and colonialism as such, a spatial understanding of these concepts and their relationship is possible—imperialism would refer to whatever relates to the center, while colonialism would encompass whatever has to do with the periphery.
- Concerning the terrain of inquiry, the postcolonial may be viewed as comprehensive in nature—analysis of the imperial and the colonial as encompassing both cultural production and material matrix.
- On the referential reach of the relationship between the imperial and the colonial, a broad understanding is possible—the periphery would be examined not only in terms of the center but also in its own terms.
- Regarding interaction between the imperial and the colonial, the mode of encounter may be approached from a multifarious perspective—similarities and differences may be acknowledged and theorized both within and between imperial-colonial formations, that is, between center and periphery in any one formation and between centers and peripheries in different formations.

*Disciplinary Parameters.* The question of parameters or scope involves the range of postcolonial criticism. Without question, the components at work behind the delineation of such a range betray a highly diverse and disputed array of positions. With respect to the project of postcolonial biblical criticism, the following options within this array are especially relevant.

- With respect to operative breadth, the postcolonial may be regarded as expansive—the discussion would comprehend imperial-colonial formations across a variety of historical periods and/or cultural contexts, from antiquity through the present and both within and outside the West.
- With respect to underlying rationale, the postcolonial may be viewed as inclusive—the discussion would embrace a variety of political and economic frameworks, both within and outside modernity and capitalism.

*Program for Application: Postcolonial Biblical Criticism.* Within postcolonial studies, therefore, there is ample room for a conceptualization and formulation of its envisioned domain as transhistorical and transcultural and of its proposed task as fundamentally comparative in nature. Not all would agree, but the theoretical space is there, even if largely unexplored. Thus, from the

point of view of disciplinary parameters, a deployment of the postcolonial angle in biblical criticism would emerge as entirely warranted, since no imperial-colonial formation would be ruled out of consideration on historical or cultural grounds and no underlying framework deemed out of bounds in political or economic terms.

There is also ample room within postcolonial studies for a properly informed articulation and execution of its proposed comparative task in transhistorical and transcultural fashion. Indeed, from the point of view of disciplinary objects, such a deployment in biblical criticism can be readily instituted along the major lines of reference indicated above: the postcolonial angle as foregrounding “conscientization” of the geopolitical problematic irrespective of existing conditions, restricting the imperial to the center and the colonial to the periphery, taking up both the realm of the textual and that of the historical, attending to the imperial and the colonial in mutual relationship as well as by themselves, and addressing similarities and differences in comparing the imperial and the colonial as well as imperial-colonial formations.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that in the latter half of the 1990s biblical studies and postcolonial studies began to intersect, leading to the rise of postcolonial biblical criticism. Among certain voices in postcolonial criticism, the inclusion of biblical texts and biblical interpretation into the discipline has been seen as perfectly acceptable, if not imperative—hence the moves from outside the discipline by VanZanten Gallagher and Donaldson. Similarly, the integration of the geopolitical problematic as elaborated in postcolonial analysis within its angle of vision is viewed by various quarters of biblical criticism as appropriate and even necessary. Such is the objective of the various forays from within. What for biblical criticism represents a further expansion of ideological criticism becomes for postcolonial criticism a further expansion of the comparative project. In the mid- to late 1990s, both expansions were, in a sense, waiting to happen: in biblical interpretation, ideological criticism had become thoroughly entrenched and highly sophisticated; in postcolonial criticism, theory and practice had steadily extended in new directions and fields.

### *A Guiding Project*

A final word is in order regarding a vision for the unfolding project of postcolonial biblical criticism. From the first, as the account of its irruption shows, this project has been conceived in terms of texts and interpretations. Indeed, I would argue, a threefold application should be contemplated and

pursued with a view of the various levels at work as interrelated and interdependent.

- At a first level of critical attention, postcolonial criticism would engage in analysis of the biblical texts, whether of ancient Israel or early Christianity, both within and vis-à-vis their respective imperial-colonial formations.
- At a second level, postcolonial criticism would pursue the analysis of interpretations and interpreters of these texts in the Western tradition, again within and vis-à-vis the imperial-colonial formations at the heart of Western hegemony and expansionism.
- At a third level, postcolonial criticism would engage in analysis of interpretations and interpreters of the texts on a global scale, once again within and vis-à-vis the imperial-colonial formations at the core of contemporary globalization.

Thus, postcolonial biblical criticism would embrace analysis of the geopolitical relationship of power in the worlds of antiquity, modernity, and postmodernity. At all levels, furthermore, such analysis would involve—depending on the nature and objective of the inquiry in question—attention to the cultural production and the material matrix of the imperial-colonial formation in question. Postcolonial biblical criticism would thus have as its domain the remains, representations, and artificers of biblical antiquity and pursue its task across all such levels in any variety of ways.

### *The Gospel of John: A Postcolonial Reading*

With an overall vision of postcolonial criticism in place, I now turn to the Gospel of John for a concrete application. The Fourth Gospel, as it happens, is featured relatively prominently in postcolonial biblical criticism.<sup>6</sup> That it should have attracted such attention should not prove surprising. This is a writing, after all, where the postcolonial problematic is very much in evidence, prominent as well as pervasive. It is primarily religious in character, to be sure, but it is also a text with strong geopolitical preoccupations and ramifications.

Without question, the Gospel constitutes a classic example of religious writing with a driving focus on matters human and divine. Its tale involves classic elements of such writing: a realm of spirit and deities—an “other-world”; a realm of matter and human beings—a “this-world”; and a pattern of interaction between these realms—the complex web of relations that mark

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley, eds., *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power*, vol. 7, *The Bible and Postcolonialism* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002).

the coexistence and engagement of the two “worlds.” The Gospel stands, however, as a writing with decidedly political overtones. The Gospel conveys its political concerns at various levels and by way of conflict, all ultimately and closely interrelated: the local or “national”—depicting regional conflict among various groupings within the area of colonial Palestine; the global or “international”—portraying geopolitical conflict between the imperial and the colonial within the framework of the Roman Empire; and the cosmic or “transworldly”—presenting mythical conflict between suprahuman powers within the conception of reality as a whole.

The Gospel thus advances a view of the religious beliefs and practices of Jesus and his movement as being in conflict with the ruling circles of colonial Palestine, the overseeing masters of imperial Rome, and the supreme ruler of the demonic this-world—all characterized as in league with one another. This conflict, moreover, bears broader, even universal dimensions. To begin with, it reaches beyond the ranks of the elite to the masses in general, whether in Palestine or throughout the Empire. In addition, it further encompasses, in principle, all political frameworks and all ethnic groupings beyond the borders of Rome. It is thus a conflict that impinges ultimately on all human beings in the this-world. It is, therefore, a conflict not only profoundly religious but also profoundly political.

The Gospel is thus a text that seeks to wield power in the religious and political spheres at once. It invalidates and displaces all existing institutions, authorities, values, norms, ideals, and goals, while promoting and emplacing alternative ones. This the Gospel does from within the imperial-colonial framework of Rome, and, as such, acknowledges and problematizes the uneven relationship of power at work within this framework, thereby making it a postcolonial text.

For this geopolitical problematic and project, I turn to that unit that functions as both formal introduction to the narrative as a whole and strategic entrée to the vision of reality constructed and deployed by the narrative—John 1:1–18, traditionally known as the “prologue” to the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> Within this opening salvo of the Gospel, a foundational and programmatic postcolonial reflection takes place—a critical surfacing and awareness of the imperial-colonial problematic. Such “conscientization” may be summarized by way of the set of constitutive components undergirding the reality or setting of the Gospel: the other-world envisioned, the this-world acknowledged, and

<sup>7</sup> For a grounding analysis of this unit from a literary, rhetorical, and ideological perspective, see Fernando F. Segovia, “John 1:1–19 as Entrée into Johannine Reality: Representation and Ramifications,” in John Painter, R. Alan Culpepper, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Word, Theology, and Community in John* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 33–64.

the web of relations established among such worlds. With the prologue, therefore, the Gospel strikes a radical postcolonial alternative—a vision of absolute otherness.

### *Envisioning the Other-World*

The projection of the other-world, conveyed through the first and final sections of John 1:1–18, provides a solid point of departure for a postcolonial analysis. This world above is advanced as a world of “glory,” a spatial and temporal dimension of reality, a mythological beginning. Such a world has not been constructed in a cultural or social vacuum.

Within the imperial tradition and context of Rome, a rather populous and flexible vision of the world above is in place. This is an other-world where numerous deities dwell—a pantheon of indigenous and assimilated divine figures where heroic, divinized humans can and do find their way—a supra-human abode revealing a broad range of divinitas where emperors themselves receive or claim a home—a divine point of origins or destinations for supreme rulers of the political world. In contrast, the prologue advances a very different conception of the other-world: all such deities, heroes, and monarchs are nowhere to be found; they have all been excluded. Instead, there is but the God of all, one and supreme, though accompanied by another and lesser god, the Word. Such a God is that of Judaism, hence a deity from the colonial periphery. Within the colonial tradition and context of Judea, however, the vision of the world above allows for the one and only God, surrounded by various gradations of spiritual beings. In contrast, the introduction advances a very different conception of this deity as well: this one and only God has engendered—along the familial lines of a father-son relationship—an only-born god, the Word. This god is portrayed as dwelling in the presence or bosom of God, possessing full knowledge of God, and having the power to make God known.

This construction of the other-world bears distinct political implications. In the first place, it forces the withdrawal of any type of divine foundation or validation from the imperial center and from its authorities, institutions, practices, and beliefs. The God of all is a god not from the center but from the periphery. This God is not one among many or even the first among many but the one and only God. This God can be known not through the official representatives and channels of the empire but only through the Word. Similarly, it also denies any divine grounding or justification to the colonial periphery or its institutions, authorities, beliefs, or practices. The God of all is a god who has begotten an only-born god, the Word, who alone

reclines upon the breast of God and alone serves as its messenger and revealer. This God is approached, therefore, not through the established delegates or venues of the Jewish “nation” or ethnos but only through the Word. The introduction thus deprives both Rome and Judea of all other-worldly sanction or power. The same applies to all other political frameworks, whether within the Roman Empire itself or outside of it. Over and beyond the God of all, therefore, all power is vested in the Word.

Such a move on the part of John 1:1–18 is profoundly deconstructive and subversive, placing all powers-that-be in the this-world under a new supreme and ultimate power, the Word of God. Appeal to the Word in the face of worldly power is thus made possible, and hence all power in the this-world is relativized—delegitimated and decentered. In any imperial-colonial framework—indeed, in any political framework whatsoever—this is a dangerous and momentous move, laying the grounds for an alternative path.

### *Envisioning the This-World*

The configuration of the this-world, undertaken in the central section of John 1:3–17, proves quite important as well for a postcolonial reading. This world below is represented as a world of “flesh,” a spatial and temporal dimension of reality distinct from the world of “glory,” both emerging out of it and in ignorance of it.

To begin with, the introduction attributes all that is, emphatically without exception, to the agency of the Word, who alone is responsible for the whole of creation and thus of the this-world. As a result, the power vested in the Word is enormously enhanced. In effect, engendered by God, with full knowledge and sole revelation of God, the Word engenders, in turn, all that has come to be. As such, all of creation, including both the imperial center and the colonial periphery, stands under and is subject to the power of the Word, just as the Word itself stands under and is subject to God. Quite unexpectedly and inexplicably, the this-world is characterized as existing in death and darkness, marked by sin and falsehood, with life, light, grace, and truth available only through the Word. Judgment is passed, thereby, on the imperial center and the colonial periphery. In fact, not only Rome and Judea but all powers-that-be and all human beings in the this-world lie and should lie under the ultimate and supreme power of the Word, and without it, they stand in darkness and death as well as in falsehood and sin.

This move on the part of John 1:1–18 proves more deconstructive and subversive still, depicting the powers-that-be in the this-world as alien to the ultimate and supreme power of the Word of God. Recourse to the Word in

the face of worldly power thus becomes imperative, and consequently all power in the this-world is not only relativized but also pronounced estranged—deflated and deracinated. In any imperial-colonial framework—and, again, in any political context whatsoever—such a stance is perilous and consequential, pointing the way toward an alternative path.

### *Envisioning the Relationship between Worlds*

The blueprint of the relationship between the other-world and the this-world, elaborated in the middle section of John 1:1–18 through the unfolding of the relationship between the Word and the world, adds a key dimension to a postcolonial reading. The way to reconcile the estrangement between the world below and the world above is set forth, but only two radically different options are presented.

To start, the introduction offers a resolution to the situation of estrangement by having the Word of God become embodied and enfleshed in the this-world. The only-born god and agent of all creation enters and becomes part of the world below—a human being in the colonial periphery, a member of the Jewish people and a subject of the Roman Empire. As a result, the power of the Word, and thus the power of the God of all, is deposited in a human being from the political margins—a god-man by the name of Jesus, born in Nazareth of Galilee. In him the glory of the other-world abides. He alone knows and reveals God; he is the unique dispenser of life, light, grace, and truth; he is the agent of all creation. Thereby, in the face of all worldly power, the ultimate and supreme power of the Word is assigned a specific location within the this-world. To this god-man both the imperial center and the colonial periphery are and should be beholden, as are and should be all powers-that-be and all human beings in the this-world.

At the same time, the presence and revelation of Jesus, the Word of God, in the this-world result in two different and conflicting scenarios regarding the situation of estrangement: on the one hand, alienation might be overcome (yielding life, light, grace, and truth); on the other hand, alienation might be transformed into outright opposition (yielding death, darkness, sin, and falsehood). The result depends on the reaction in the world below to such revelation and presence. In effect, Jesus divides the this-world into two sides: those who reject the god-man by refusing to believe and those who accept by believing. The former undergo transformation from alienation to hostility, seeking in vain to overcome the god-man; the latter undergo rebirth from God, becoming children of God and members of the other-world within the this-world. In the face of all worldly power, therefore, the ultimate

and supreme power of the Word is further assigned a concrete locus among his followers in the world below. To these children of God, both the imperial center and the colonial periphery, as well as all powers-that-be and all human beings in the this-world, lie and should lie beholden.

Such a move on the part of John 1:1–18 proves even more deconstructive and subversive, revealing all the powers-that-be in the this-world as standing in opposition to the ultimate and supreme power of the Word of God. Following the Word in the face of all worldly power is thus pronounced indispensable, so that all power in the this-world is not only relativized and declared estranged but also unmasked as hostile—discovered and dislocated. At the same time, power within the this-world is relocated to a particular human being—the god-man Jesus and his circle of followers—the children of God. In any imperial-colonial framework—and, to be sure, in any political framework—such a position is at once risky and pregnant, laying out the alternative path.

#### *Prologue as Postcolonial Alternative*

In the very midst of an imperial-colonial framework, based within the extensive and enormously powerful imperial context of Rome and with particular reference to the colonial Judean temple-state and its governing classes, John 1:1–18 raises the question of geopolitics and hence the postcolonial problematic. The Gospel continues this quandary and expands it in the narrative that follows. Within the reality and experience of Rome in general and of Judea in particular, John 1:1–18 further sets forth the fundamentals of an alternative path—a substitute reality and experience—to be acknowledged, embraced, and executed. The details and consequences of this alternative path are filled out in the remainder of the gospel narrative. The path encompasses the whole of reality, in itself conceived as two-tiered—the other-world of God and the this-world of humans. Laid out in overwhelmingly religious terms, it has immediate and far-reaching ramifications for all of culture and society, including the political realm. It is a path that extends in principle beyond the imperial-colonial framework of Rome and Judea to encompass all other political frameworks and hence all human beings in the this-world. This path is not presented simply as an option among others but as radically different and uniquely superior—the only true option, in contrast to and defiance of all other existing paths. Consequently, the substitute reality and experience introduced in John 1:1–18 and subsequently elaborated on in the narrative emerge as all-embracing, all-surpassing, all-defining.

Within the reality and experience of Rome and Judea, this path sets up a rival system of power. Its structure and reach envelop the world above, the world below, and the mode of interaction between the two worlds. With respect to the other-world, ultimate and supreme power is reserved, beyond the God of all, to the figure of the Word, the only-born god engendered by God. This Word is with God, whom it alone knows and it alone reveals. No other figure, divine or semidivine, from the imperial-colonial framework of Rome or any other political framework, is to be found in such a construction of the world above. With regard to the this-world, then, ultimate and supreme power is located in the Word as well. First, as creator of all that is, and second, as depository of all life, light, grace, and truth. Without the Word, therefore, all that is—all human beings and all political frameworks, including that of the Roman Empire and colonial Judea—stands in falsehood, sin, darkness, and death. With respect to transworld interaction, finally, ultimate and supreme power is further concretized within the this-world: centered in the figure of the Word made flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, and then extended onto his group of followers.

In this construction of the interchange between worlds, all attributes of the Word come to reside, first, in a specific human being (Jesus as Messiah and Savior of the world), and second, within his circle of adherents (the believers as those born of God, the children of God). Consequently, within the this-world, light and life as well as grace and truth can be found only in and through Jesus and his disciples. Needless to say, this rival system of power stands, in principle, over against not just the imperial-colonial framework of Rome but all political frameworks and all human beings.

With John 1:1–18, therefore, a set of key strategies begin to be deployed for the purpose of dealing with the postcolonial problematic. Primary among them are the following:

- displacement and desacralization—the removal of power from all existing structures and channels in both worlds
- replacement and resacralization—the relocation of power in substitute structures and channels in both worlds
- “othering”—a portrayal of the outside as chaos: prior to the Word, the world as utterly devoid of epistemic and moral compass (unalive and unenlightened as well as ungraceful and untruthful); after the Word, the world as utterly depraved, morally and epistemically (rejectful, full of hatred, violent)
- inversion—a portrayal of the inside as whole: the group as utterly privileged (children of God, born of God through the Word) and utterly

blessed (alive and enlightened, grace-full and truth-full) in epistemic and moral terms

Thus, at the very heart of the imperial-colonial framework of Rome and Judea, and extending in principle to all other political frameworks, the Johannine response to the question of geopolitics in John 1:1–18 is clear. In effect, and despite any appearances to the contrary, the response is: the Word of God that holds ultimate and supreme power in the world above; Jesus as the Word made flesh that dispenses such power in the world below; and the followers of Jesus as children of God who inherit and transmit such power in the world below.

What, in the end, is this path? A counterempire, I would propose. In face of the geopolitics at work within the Roman Empire, and in light of corresponding divine cosmopolitics as well as the colonial situation of Judea and Judaism, the Gospel posits—first *in nuce*, through its introduction in 1:1–18, then in full, via the unfolding narrative—a substitute geopolitics with an underlying divine cosmopolitics of its own with implications for Judea and Judaism. This alternative path sets up a rival and superior empire, an empire of God, in which heaven and earth come together in and through a specific religious grouping made up of those who believe in the Word (the savior of the empire) and become thereby children of God (subjects of the empire). This formation is thus transformed into the imperial center of the world below, within which the masters of the world above are to be found, with all other peoples and territories as colonial margins or peripheries. The repercussions of this imperial formation for all cultures and societies, both within the Roman Empire and beyond, are momentous. In its presence, submission and obedience are in order, and then privileges and benefits will accrue as a result. Should resistance and opposition erupt, however, retribution shall follow (exclusion). In other words, the other face of empire—a counterempire, but it will be an empire nonetheless.

### *A Concluding Reflection*

Postcolonial criticism should not stop with analysis of the ancient texts. I have already argued that it should include analysis of the interpretations and interpreters of the texts as well, all within their respective imperial-colonial frameworks. I would further argue that such analysis should not stop with exposition—setting forth the problematic as constructed in the text, its readings or readers—but should also go on to engagement, pursuing a critical dialogue with all such constructions. For this purpose, of course, it is imperative to analyze one's own geopolitical context and to work toward a properly

considered stance within it. Only then can a properly informed critical dialogue be launched. As such, I would further argue that postcolonial analysis must be in touch with postcolonial studies, in all of its complex and sophisticated repertoire, not only as it applies to both cultural production and material reality, but also as it affects and is affected by a variety of other critical areas of study and discursive frameworks. This may be a very tall order, yet it is a crucial one. All in all, the future of postcolonial biblical criticism comes across as not only assured but also indispensable as it searches back, around, and forward.

# On the Doctrine of Atonement

by ROBERT W. JENSON

Dr. Robert W. Jenson helped found the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, where he continues to serve on the Board, and is cofounder and co-senior editor of *Pro Ecclesia*, a journal of theology published by the Center. He was previously a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry, serving as Senior Scholar for Research. He presented this lecture at the Center of Theological Inquiry on March 9, 2006.

THE phrase “doctrine of atonement” is generally used to signify an account of why Jesus’ death on a cross is important to us and specifically for our relation to God. “Atonement” is a deliberate coinage—though an old one, documented to 1513—meaning the act of putting things at one, particularly where a previous unity has been broken. In its theological use, the word thus presumes that what happened at Jesus’ death was a reunion between God and us, which seems a biblically sound assumption. A *doctrine* of atonement is then an attempt to say how Jesus’ crucifixion does that.

It is commonplace to observe that there is no dogma of atonement, that although in Christology there is dogma established at all seven ecumenical councils, no council—or pope or other plausibly ecumenical authority—has ever laid down a dogma of atonement. If you deny that Christ is “of one being with the Father,” or that the Son and Jesus are but one hypostasis, you are formally a heretic. But you can deny any explanation of how the atonement works, or all of them together, or even deny that any explanation is possible, and be a perfectly orthodox believer. To be sure, if you simply deny that Jesus’ death does in fact somehow reunite us with God, you are no Christian at all, but that is a different sort of deficiency.

Indeed, not even informally is there a generally accepted proposal. There is instead an inherited heap of proposals, classically if somewhat heavy-handedly and prejudicially sorted out by Gustav Aulen in his immensely influential *Christus Victor*. To be sure, in the West, Anselm of Canterbury’s proposal—or rather a perversion of it—is often called “the doctrine of atonement,” but if we look to the full ecumene we observe that this identification is mere provincialism, Anselm having had at best a mixed reputation in the East. Some make a virtue of this proliferation of proposals and the absence of formal or informal consensus around any one of them; others see in it a historical failure and a challenge to do better. I am among the latter, which may be unwise, but there I am.

Those who make a virtue of our historical irresolution often say that the atonement at the cross is so profound a mystery that it can be evoked only by heaping up tropes. So it will be said that Anselm, with his “objective” doctrine, Abelard, with his “subjective” theory, and the ancient fathers who spoke of Christ as Victor over Satan and his powers—and any further contributors one might find—were not, in fact, doing what they each thought they were doing, providing a conceptual account of the cross’s atoning efficacy. Instead, it might be said that they were putting forward “images” of what happened on the cross, and that now looking back we should say that this is just fine, and indeed the more such images are heaped up around the cross the better. The language of “images” has even become a standard way of referring to doctrines of atonement.

This move has its followers, including folks I respect, but I get nervous whenever someone says that something is too mysterious to talk about with concepts. Images have their own grip on reality and are indispensable, but getting along *only* with images is problematic. True “mysteries” in the biblical use of the notion indeed often *break* our concepts and may even confront us with truth whose conceptual description obeys Gödel’s maxim that truth cannot be proved, but mysteries in the biblical sense do not reduce us to exclusive reliance on images. Thus, the Incarnation is indeed a *mysterion*, in that it is in itself an irreducible contingency, transforms other reality, and is to be known only if God reveals it—and I have just recited three perfectly conceptual and coherent things theology has said about it. So also the cross as atonement is a mystery in that proper biblical sense, which by no means excuses us from clear conceptual discourse about it and about its mysterious character.

Thus, I am instead inclined to say that the historical record simply displays a theological question that we have so far not been able to answer in a fully satisfying way—which would, after all, not be the only such case. The notion that Anselm and the Fathers and the rest were proposing not theories but images or metaphors—and that the more of these we heap up the more we celebrate the mystery—seems to me a rather plain case of making a virtue of a failure. And I am even so rash as to think I have a theory as to *why* the church’s thinking has so far failed at this point.

So my first endeavor will be to present my theory. Very early, Christian theology of the cross made two paired errors, which are of a piece with wider errors. The Bible makes sense of the cross by narratively and rhetorically locating it in history, as told in the Bible, and by conceptualizing the linkage. The twin errors I am about to discuss did their damage in concert by cutting away the event of the cross from its location in the biblical story.

The first error cut the cross off from its *future*, in the Resurrection, without which, in the Bible's general view of reality, a crucifixion would be anything but beneficial. The pattern of the primal kerygma of atonement is displayed in Luke's presentation of the first Christian sermon: Jesus was put to death by the hands of sinful men, but God raised him up; *therefore* a return to God and life in his Spirit are open to you. However, this is not the pattern of our inherited postbiblical theories; in fact, when theologians steeped in one of the inherited theories encounter this primal biblical doctrine outside the Bible, they sometimes do not recognize it.

The other mistake was to sever the cross from its *past*, in the canonical history of Israel. Without its specific location in Israel's adventure with God, the crucifixion of this one provincial celebrity, on suspicion of religio-political conspiracy, would hardly have been noteworthy amid the thousands of such Roman executions, even if he had thereafter "appeared to many." Nevertheless, the inherited theories discuss the Crucifixion in essential abstraction from Israel's history. It is not surprising that they prove unconvincing in the long run.

First, then, consider the separation of atonement and resurrection. In one way or another, the historically inherited theories of atonement presume that the action of atonement is finished when Jesus dies, so that the Resurrection then accomplishes something else, if indeed often no more than to repair collateral damage done by the Crucifixion. Anselm's doctrine is perhaps the most notorious in its ability to do without the Resurrection.

Anselm is, of course, regularly denounced on other grounds. Before proceeding to my own critique, fairness compels me to come to his defense, for many of those who attack—or affirm—"the Anselmian theory of atonement" do not seem to have read his text. Anselm does not say that Jesus' death satisfies God's wrath or that God punishes Jesus instead of us. Quite to the contrary, Anselm presents Jesus' death as God's *rescue* of creatures who are on a self-destructive path, which God accomplishes by *averting* a regime of punishment and instituting instead a regime of repair.

Nevertheless, Anselm's doctrine does have a fatal flaw: the Resurrection is not integral to achieving this result. Both in Anselm himself and in the bowdlerizations of Anselm, which are presented as "the" doctrine of atonement, God and humanity are reconciled when Jesus dies, and the Resurrection tidies up. It is very likely that Anselm, a devoted reader of scripture, bishop, and regular celebrant of Eucharist, simply assumed that nothing theologically interesting works without the Resurrection, but his theory does not state this explicitly.

To grasp the second founding error we should remember that aforementioned exegetical commonplace: that the gospels' own interpretation of the cross consists for the most part of embedding it in the Old Testament narrative. As is well known, hardly a detail of the gospels' Passion narrative fails to invoke some Old Testament text or event. And Pauline and Johannine theology explained the meaning of the cross with Old Testament concepts used in their original sacrificial and eschatological force.

Postapostolic Christian theology quickly isolated the cross from its biblical embedding in Old Testament discourse, especially at the dogmatic level, if not in preaching or in the liturgy. Both the early rules of faith and the baptismal and conciliar creeds that developed from them skip straight from Creation to the Incarnation, leaving out the whole of the Lord's history with Israel. To be sure, Marcion's proposal, to reject the Old Testament's God altogether, was too much: it was immediately seen that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ had to be the Creator, so Creation got in. But for all the creed's display, the Creator could just as well have sent his Son to reunite humanity with himself, without having called Abraham, or having led Israel from Egypt, or having dwelt in the temple, or having sent Israel into exile and having—sort of—brought them back, or indeed, without having done any of the works described in the Old Testament after the first chapter of Genesis. Think how the Roman creed goes: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ . . ."

The omission of the Lord's history with Israel in Christian theology is not accidental or explicable by circumstance, for it has been pervasive in other central aspects of the church's life and theology, not just in the creeds. For a central location in the life of the church, closely parallel to creedal formation, the Lord commanded us to give thanks to God in the style of Israel's table thanksgivings, sharing in the thanksgiving by sharing bread and cup, again in Jewish style. And most Christians have more or less obeyed. But our thanksgiving has routinely omitted the Exodus and the giving of Torah and the sending of the prophets, and indeed everything that must have figured in the thanksgiving Jesus himself offered. Most, not all, eucharistic prayers mentioned Creation and the Fall—which, I suppose, is some improvement over the creeds—and then went straight to Jesus and his cross.

As to systematic theology, many powerful systems make no use of the Old Testament except as witness to Creation and sin and as religious background for Jesus. The systems of classical liberalism, fragments of which still dominate in this country, often do not even do as much. Indeed, classical liberal theology was partially powered by a desire to detach Christianity from the Jews and their scriptures.

This isolation of the cross from the biblical history by which the gospels and the rest of the New Testament make sense of it—from the Resurrection in one direction and from God's history with Israel in the other—has inevitably compelled theology to find some other framework that can make sense of the cross. If we come to the gospels without an antecedent theory, what do we actually learn about the cross? The gospels tell of a Jewish prophet and rabbi executed by Jewish and Roman authorities because he proclaimed and enacted the Kingdom with utter immediacy and so “made himself the Son of God.” For the Jews, this meant blasphemy, and for the Romans, it translated to “pitiful would-be rival to the Caesar.” The biblical witnesses reveal how they interpret the events mainly in the way they tell the story, as one event of a longer narrative. In the temporal direction, they report it as an incident within the whole scriptural history of Israel; in the other direction, it is recounted to trump and conclude the story of the execution with the message of resurrection. Our inherited theologies of atonement, however, having severed these connections, must imagine some other framework and some other event within it.

So Anselm imagined a universal feudal system in which the good of each member is invested in the mutual giving of honor where due, construed sin as disruption of the universal balance of honor, and construed the atonement as creatures' rescue from disaster by God's restoration of the balance. I do not say that the resulting doctrine is altogether false or that one cannot make use of it in some contexts. The vision is detachable from feudalism and bears consideration for its own sake. But it remains that Anselm's transaction of honor is indeed *imagined*, that it has little resemblance to the narrative in scripture, and that a free-floating imagination of this sort is indeed apt to become one trope among others, to be piled at the foot of the cross.

In contrast, Abelard imagined a universal divine moral pedagogy aimed at educating moral creatures in virtue—particularly in the virtue most lacking among fallen creatures, love. Then he construed the cross as the overwhelming display of God's love, which breaks our hardened hearts and moves us to love in response. Again, I do not say there is nothing in this, only that it is again the imagining of an event other than the one the gospels narrate. Indeed, it is an evocation of love that could have been accomplished by some event other than the cross and even within the history of some nation other than Israel, and therefore, it will eventually work out as just another nice metaphor to heap around the cross.

So essentially, most of the Eastern fathers imagined—not to put too fine a point on it—a myth. Consequent on the fall of certain angels, they said, there had been continuous warfare between God and those now satanic powers,

and the heavily veiled manifestation of that battle was all the overt turmoil of earthly history. In this war, the Incarnation of God the Son and the giving of him over to crucifixion was a brilliant tactical move by which God gained final victory. Only on the surface was Jesus crucified by Jewish and Roman authorities. What actually happened was an attempt by Satan to kill what he thought was a human savior who turned out to be God the Son himself and who broke Satan's power.

Scripture does use mythic fragments and images in a variety of contexts and ways in telling of the cross. But it never tells a whole myth, nor does it convey this one. Scripture breaks up Eastern antiquity's mythic worldview, retaining some of its bits and pieces for its own quite different purposes. The fathers reversed this and made up a whole new myth from some of those bits and pieces, creating a frame within which to understand the cross. The resultant patristic imagery of conflict and victory is powerful and even spiritually transformative, but theology, born of the urge to *demythologize*, must eventually come to regard the patristic imagery as merely imagery, which, of course, is how we now handle it, even when declaring allegiance to "the patristic doctrine."

So what must we do instead? A first step is liturgical. We honor the way in which the atoning Crucifixion is indeed a *mysterion* in the proper sense when we recognize that its primal construal is recital and enactment of the Passion narrative in and by the liturgical celebration of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil, as well as by the condensation of that triple celebration in each Sunday Eucharist. We understand the cross as our reunion with God when we ourselves are made actors in the cross's story—a story that in the ancient three-day celebration is indeed complete with Israel and the Resurrection. The traditional liturgy of the three days incorporates us into the action by repeated communion, relates Israel's complete history through readings and prayers, and allows neither conclusion nor benediction until the Resurrection has been proclaimed.

It is undoubtedly this liturgical sequence, transcending the limitations of the creeds and of the doctrines taught in schools, that kept understanding of the atonement alive for so many centuries. I suggest that it is the loss of this liturgy in most of Protestantism, and the concurrent loss of its Sunday compendium, that has slowly but inevitably delivered Protestantism over, on the one hand, to the grotesqueries of "blood atonement" and the like and, on the other hand, to a doctrine of atonement that may be summarized: God loves us all regardless, and now let's get on to the real issues of peace and justice.

I have examined the liturgical knowledge of atonement in my *Systematic Theology*.<sup>1</sup> Here I want to consider something else—I want to develop a *theoretical* construal that in the systematics appears only *in nuce*. A doctrine of the atonement is supposed to conceptualize our reunion with God. What I will attempt to do here—an effort that is hardly begun in *Systematic Theology*—is to show how the event of the cross, taken with its biblical past and future, does this. What is needed is a conceptual framework that does not substitute for the biblical history but rather exemplifies it. Just such a framework is at hand.

It is the *triune* God with whom we need to be reunited. Trinitarian doctrine's statements describing the relationships that make up the life of this God—that the Father begets the Son and breathes the Spirit, that the Son is begotten of the Father and sends the Spirit, that the Spirit frees the Father and Son to love each other—describe the plot of that biblical story I have been invoking. And trinitarian doctrine's identification of Father, Son, and Spirit as three in God names the carrying *dramatis personae* of that story. Thus a particular location within the biblical story also describes a particular location in the life of God and a particular set of relationships to the three divine persons. A construal of how the cross, with its past and future, unites us with God must also say how this reunion involves us *in* the divine life *with* each of these divine persons.

For we can be reunited with the *triune* God only as we are fitted into the triune life. With some other sort of God, matters might stand differently. But the biblical God is no monad; we cannot be reunited with him as one might reunite two pennies by stacking them. Nor can the specifically triune God sustain any merely causal relation to the world, in any current use of “causal”; he cannot reunite us with himself by endeavoring to change us. The relation of creatures to this God is always a function of their *involvement* with the three who are God—or, in abysmal possibility, their *disinvolvement*.

So we must go triune person by person—remembering always that the kind of discourse that follows is a kind of sloganeering—that “the Father” is the God of Israel; “the Spirit” is the power of Resurrection, the power of God’s future; and “the Son” is the Son Israel was called to be and who in the resurrection is that *totus Christus* that includes us. If this is not remembered, it may appear that in the following statements I do what I have rebuked the tradition for doing: replacing the biblical narrative with a framework invented by theologians.

<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 256.

We need to be—and are—reconciled *to* the Father *in* the Son *by* the Spirit. Here and in the following, readers should pay heed to the prepositions. We need to be reconciled to the Father because we are at odds with him, at odds with the very one by whose sheer will we exist. That is, we are in rebellion against the Torah that tells us of the Father's will—it is in this patrological connection that talk of disobedience should appear in our doctrine of atonement. The Spirit—meaning the Spirit as the agent—reconciles us to the Father by making us one moral subject with Christ, who on the cross *is* obedient to the Father, even unto death. As both Luther and Jonathan Edwards taught, the Spirit so unites us with Christ that the Father's judgment, "You are righteous," is not fiction or a legal maneuver but a judgment of observed fact, although observable, to be sure, only by the Father. It is by cross and resurrection that the Spirit accomplishes this unity, when he enables the Son to cleave to us, even though we kill him, and enables us to cleave to the Son's risen presence.

We need to be reconciled to the Spirit, and are, *by* the Son—meaning the Son as the agent—*before* the Father. We need to be reconciled to the Spirit because we have backed off from the fulfillment to which he draws us, we have cowered before the utter transformation toward which the Spirit has prodded us since Creation, and we have not, in Bultmann's famous phrase, "been open to the future."

Thus it is in this pneumatological connection that talk of unbelief should appear in our doctrine of atonement. The Son reconciles us to the Spirit by entering that wonderful and frightening future before us, going through the end of this world on the cross and entering the Kingdom through the Resurrection, all the while appealing to his Father to honor his dearly purchased solidarity with us, just as, in the Resurrection, the Father does. Thus the Son brings us along as he follows the Spirit's leading. Indeed, as Paul taught, the Son so reconciles us to the Spirit that the Spirit even prays to the Father from within us, as so much our own voice that we cannot hear him.

We need to be reconciled to the Son, and are, *by* the Father, *in* the Spirit. We need to be reconciled to the Son because we have wanted to be individuals, a rebellion that is not uniquely modern. We have not wanted to be members of one body together, the body of Christ, to have our life within the *totus Christus*. In fact, we have not wanted to live within *any* personal whole other than that which each of us hopelessly tries to make for himself or herself. It is in this Christological connection that a consideration of our being *incurvatus in se*, turned into ourselves, should be required in our doctrine of atonement. The Father, however, sends the Son into eternal

identification with us, even unto Sheol, so that we simply cannot escape being one with the Son and so with one another. And in the Spirit we willingly live that identification, for the members of the Son's body are also his people and his spouse, which without our will we cannot be. So we are reconciled to the triune God by acts of each of the three over against the other two. Thus it may indeed appear that we are reconciled to God by his being reconciled in himself—but that is a matter for another essay.

# The Gospel Blimp Revisited: A Reflection on Christian Witness and Persecution

by ROBERT A. SEIPLE

*Ambassador Robert A. Seiple is the founder and Chairman of the Board of the Institute for Global Engagement. He has served as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and was previously President of World Vision, Inc., and President of Eastern College and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author of Ambassador of Hope: How Christians Can Respond to the World's Toughest Problems (2004). He delivered this address as the Kuyper Lecture on April 6, 2006, at the Mackay Campus Center.*

MANY of my personal views on the complex intersection between proselytism and persecution were crystallized by an incident in 1998 when I was working for the United States State Department. During the summer of that year, thirty Filipino Christians were ushered off to jail for distributing Bibles in the closed Islamic state of Saudi Arabia. It doesn't require too much imagination to see how the combination of elements in this episode—Bibles, Christians, and Saudi Arabia—could have been a recipe for disaster. Fortunately a disaster was avoided. Working with both the United States Embassy and the Philippine Embassy, the State Department was able to get each of these earnest Filipino evangelists released—immediately deported, but released—before the summer was over.

Four months later I was in Saudi Arabia, and I stopped by the Philippine Embassy to thank the ambassador for his help in the successful resolution of this incident. “You know,” he said to me, “under Saudi Arabian law you can bring one Bible into the country in your briefcase. These people tried to smuggle 20,000 of them into the country. Then they claimed Saudi Arabia for Christ by the year 2000!” I was not unfamiliar with these kinds of bold, if unrealistic, missionary campaigns, but to the Philippine ambassador this was nothing less than bizarre. “They were running out of time,” he went on, “and here they still had all these Bibles. So they started to walk down the streets of Riyadh, throwing Bibles over the walls, literally hitting unsuspecting Muslims on the head. Saudi Arabia’s Muttawa [religious police] stepped in immediately, of course, and thirty of my countrymen ended up in jail.”

This story reveals more than the ongoing lack of religious freedom in repressive countries like Saudi Arabia. It also captures an array of issues that Christians trying to obey the Great Commission need to consider anew and which I want to discuss here this evening. These issues can be summarized in

“3 Ms”—message, motivation, and methodology. Too often Christian missionaries have naively assumed that sincere motivation and a stripped-down message of biblical orthodoxy is all that the Lord requires of us. The truth is that our Lord wants us to follow Him in his incarnational, holistic ministry—a ministry that brings the greatest honor to Him only when we are obedient in our *methodology* as well as our message and motivation.

It is difficult to overstate the urgency and the stakes for today’s church. The end of the Cold War and the rapid advance of globalization have opened up unprecedented opportunities to spread the good news to the world that “God so loved.” Nevertheless, misguided efforts in international proselytism will at best be ineffective and unsustainable and at worst, counterproductive. Consider just a sampling of the things that went wrong with the Filipino evangelists’ attempt to win the entire Saudi Arabian peninsula. First, they gave themselves an arbitrary, self-imposed time line for the evangelistic process and allowed that goal to drive them to a desperation-stage methodology. This methodology turned out to be a kind of reincarnation of “The Gospel Blimp,” a saturation bombing of the countryside with spiritual messages, a divine “psyops” (the military’s psychological operations, designed to influence attitudes). Its strategic acumen was no more sophisticated than “ready, fire, aim.”

Second, we must ask whether these Christians were so driven by the Great Commission that they gave little more than lip service to the Great Commandment. Remember the actual sequence of commands that Jesus gave us: we were commanded to *love* before we received the commission to go out and make disciples among all nations. (Note specifically the exchange between Jesus and Peter in John 21.) Love builds relationships and creates a more attractive faith and a more receptive audience. The implication is clear: if you can’t love, don’t go, regardless of the weight of the spiritual monkey on your back. You will get it all wrong.

Third, we must consider more carefully the division of labor between us and the Holy Spirit. Is it enough to throw Bibles hither and yon and simply trust that the Holy Spirit will make sure they land in the right place? Do we really always have a safety net, such that our problematic methodologies call forth a “bless the mess” response from the Holy Spirit? We must ask whether Christians are trivializing the awesome responsibility of introducing the God of history and the Christ of Calvary when they indulge in such sloppy communication strategies.

Finally, we cannot avoid the question of foreign missionary influence on local culture and whether or not there is a measure of cultural imperialism. To be sure, the charge of cultural imperialism is sometimes thrown around

liberally by critics of all evangelistic activity. Such critiques are beside the point of our discussion here because their objective is not to make evangelistic activity more sensitive and secure but to abolish it. Still, we must face with candor legitimate questions about culture and power that are at stake in international missions. Indiscriminate chucking of Bibles in an Islamic country may seem a comical and unrepresentative example of cultural clumsiness, yet it is not far removed from the arrogance that many Christians bring with them into their intercultural engagement. If Bible throwing is not a concern, why not throw baseballs—the best of our culture to yours. Or Budweisers! “This Bud is for you—Bible to follow—right back at you.”

It is issues such as these that must be confronted if we are to respond more appropriately to religious persecution abroad. Again, Christians are called to evangelization. Their right to respond to that call—the right to manifest and share religious faith publicly—is protected in international law, something that secularists (and some religious groups) often do not acknowledge. Culturally offensive and politically naive evangelistic methodologies, however, have caused unnecessary conflict. In some cases, such practices have needlessly exacerbated religious persecution and led to even tighter restrictions on Christian activity.

Christians have too often seen persecution merely as an opportunity to honor the blood of the martyrs and an occasion to generate activist pressure against repressive countries. This is fine as far as it goes, but what is missing is a candid look inward. Are Christians being persecuted because of their faith, or because of the methodology employed in sharing that faith? And then there is the most important question that almost never gets asked: what gospel were they throwing, and was it worth the persecution that followed?

### *Message*

When I was president of World Vision, I would often make trips overseas to observe the great work being done by this evangelical-sponsored relief and development organization. After such trips, I would usually spend time reporting on the ministry to various groups around the United States. Feeding stations, clean water, medical capacity, leadership development, microenterprise loans—all were discussed under the rubric of a holistic ministry. Invariably someone would ask this arresting question: “But can you give them the gospel?”

The question was predicated on a false dichotomy that plagues a great deal of our thinking today about the essence of the Christian message. When John’s disciples came to Jesus asking “Are you the one?” Jesus replied using

words that describe His incarnational gospel: “Tell John what you have seen and heard.” A word is proclaimed in visible deeds—through the blind that now see, cripples who are able to walk, lepers who are cleansed, the deaf who begin to hear, and the dead who have been raised. Then, in a single phrase, Jesus concludes this holistic gospel: “And the poor have *good news* preached to them” (Luke 7:17–22) (emphasis mine).

The simultaneously spiritual and social nature of the gospel is also evident in kingdom theology that pervades the New Testament. The book of Mark, for instance, uses plain language that we all need to recapture. The *Good News*, as Mark makes clear, is that “the Kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:14–15). Jesus moved through the cities and villages “preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom” (Matt. 9:35). Note that the central message of the kingdom gospel is immeasurably more than simply “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” As Mortimer Arias succinctly captures in the title of one of his books, the good news is the announcement of “the Reign of God.”<sup>1</sup> There is a king and a kingdom, and they will forever be a part of our new reality. This is the lead story of God’s newscast to humanity. All other news—of the “social gospel” and personal gospel, of grace and works, of seeing and hearing, of justification and sanctification—flows from this one banner headline: The kingdom of God is at hand!

So, for example, when the one lost sheep is reunited with the ninety-nine, when the search is successfully conducted for the lost coin, when the prodigal’s confession is smothered by the adoring and greatly relieved father—it is the work of the King (Luke 15:3–32)! The implication is clear: Jesus is not only Savior, He is Lord. And this, in my opinion, is what is missing in the soft, self-indulged Christianity of the West—a true sense of the divine kingship, the Lordship of Christ in all dimensions of life. Without this, our gospel will never be worthy of persecution. This loss of kingdom focus is especially strange among those Christians who claim to take the Bible seriously, for it speaks quite clearly in this regard. As Arias points out, the phrase “Kingdom of God,” used by Mark and Luke, and Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven” are repeated more than 122 times in these three gospels, ninety times from the lips of Jesus Himself. The overarching theme of the parables is the kingdom of God. The Lord’s Prayer is a kingdom prayer: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Likewise in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the kingdom is promised at

<sup>1</sup> Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

the beginning of the beatitudes to the poor (vs. 3) and at the end to the persecuted (vs. 10). It is a kingdom sermon.

Consider also the language of Passion Week, the defining moment with respect to Christ's identity and intensions. Pontius Pilate, inexplicitly and somewhat stubbornly, attached the title of "king" to the cross. Jesus is given a "crown" while the crowd mocks Him. After all, a real king would extricate himself from such a situation. The condemned thief, showing remarkable faith in one who was destined to die before him, asked to be remembered "when you come into your Kingdom" (Luke 23:42). The body is removed from the cross and wrapped in spices similar to those that were brought as gifts when the wise men came to celebrate the birth of a *king*, three decades earlier.

And then there is that all-important punctuation mark to this most amazing week. The veil of the temple, the shield that protected the holy of holies, was rent from top to bottom. Personally, I have spent most of my life looking at this phenomenon from my side of the veil, a subjective perspective interpreted in very personal terms. Like many Christians today, I have tended to celebrate "what's in it for me," namely, the level of access to God that I now enjoy because the veil was torn. This is a direct access, with Jesus as the only required mediator between me and a holy God. In this perspective, *I* become the subject of God's love affair with humanity, and the tearing of the veil becomes "all about me."

But from the other side of the veil, the *Sovereign* is the subject. I am the object of the Sovereign's love. It's all so much bigger than I am. God dramatically restates the obvious: all ground is holy. He is sovereign over all things. His reign extends over families, churches, denominations, ideologies, and institutions, as well as individuals. This means, by extension, that all things also need to be redeemed. Planet Earth is holy ground that needs to be reclaimed for the King. This is the essence of the message, and it can never be taken for granted. When persecution comes (and it will) we need to make sure that it is "for righteousness' sake" (Matt. 5:10), and not because we are preaching a redacted, truncated message whose focus has shifted from the good news of a kingdom that has broken into history to the mere servant recipients of the coming kingdom. We dare not forget Jesus' stern reprimand to his disciples when they began to selfishly and prematurely position themselves in glory (Matt. 18:1-3). Some may suggest that this emphasis on Christ's kingship, while important, is not critical to a personal relationship to Christ. I strongly disagree. The problems caused by this lack of emphasis are sometimes subtle but manifest themselves in a way that greatly diminishes our Christian witness.

Consider the following, for example, and what is ultimately at risk when “it’s all about me.” First, we will be a sucker for “feel good” preaching that peddles the characteristically Western doctrine of seeker-friendly self-esteem. The need for so much additional self-esteem is confounding. After all, we were “known before we were formed in the womb” (Jer. 1:5). We were created in the image of the God of the universe. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus (Rom. 8:17), an absolutely astounding pedigree. Our hairs are numbered and our names are engraved on the palms of his hands. We are constantly being pursued by the Hound of Heaven, like the prodigal son who is pursued by the unflagging love of his father. God doesn’t stop at anything, even if he has to sacrifice his only son—while we search for health, wealth, and God’s perfect will for our lives of low self-esteem. “Lord, I believe. Now make me feel good.”

Second, if it’s “all about me,” we should not be surprised that the most requested sermon in the United States is “How do I know God’s will for *my* life?” Many times this is the depth of our spiritual curiosity. If He is the subject, however, why not know Him? Job asked the question, “Why me?” to which God replied, “Where were you when I hung the stars” (Job 38 and 39)? God as subject and man as object became immediately clear to Job, and Job stopped asking questions of the Sovereign.<sup>2</sup>

Third, if it’s “all about me,” our prayer life will be dominated by personal petition. Heavenly praise and kingdom celebration will give way to personal desires, that is, “protect me, heal me, guard my family,” and so on. Moses gives us a wonderful example of an alternative prayer life—one that is kingdom-focused even though it emerged out of a long history of enduring oppression and deprivation. The Israelites were a persecuted people who experienced years of ethnic and religious violence. Egypt was an equal opportunity oppressor, from unfair labor practices to infanticide. Extrication from Egypt led to forty years of wilderness living where preservation was a daily priority and a harsh reality.

Yet as Moses says goodbye to the Israelites at the Jordon River, reflecting on a life almost over and a heavenly land of great promise to come, Moses’ entire discourse, both his prayer and his song of praise, is focused on the Sovereign. The language used is covenantal, suzerain in nature, a covenant of unequals where “the secret things belong to God” (Deut. 29:29). The “things revealed” are gifts from above. A profound understanding of power and

<sup>2</sup> As an important aside, our belief in absolutes does not necessarily mean that we know them absolutely! We get closer to these absolutes, however, as we get closer to the mind of God. Know Him, and that knowledge will lead to a more directed vision of our own lives.

sovereignty is amply demonstrated here. At the end of this song of worshipful adoration, Moses underscores the importance of a right relationship with the Sovereign when he says, “These are not just idle words—they are your life” (Deut. 32:47). Let us be clear: Moses would not have missed the significance of a torn temple veil! He lived his life and received its meaning under the mantra of the Sovereign, “*I am* the Lord thy God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exod. 20:2).

Fourth, when it is all about us, we find it difficult for our faith to transcend our ideology. Once the hard edge of ideology is wedded to faith, faith and ideology inevitably gravitate toward power, a power that excludes. Truth becomes a hammer; power becomes a sword that divides. In America the effect has been political polarization, something Washington calls a “red/blue divide,” referring to the ubiquitous red-state (Republican) and blue-state (Democrat) electoral maps used in coverage of recent elections. Most often Christians are “red,” a political stripe that gives far too much power to Caesar. A theology coopted by ideology, at least in principle, has the same potential for theocracy and the same theocratic abuse that we worry about in other faiths. The irony is palpable. Why is there so much focus on “our man in the White House” when we already have “our Father, who art in heaven”?

Fifth, kingdom ignorance jeopardizes effective Christian witness overseas. If it is “all about us,” there is a sense that nothing can happen until *we* get there. Like a tree falling in the woods, we behave as though the church abroad isn’t real until “our” progress is reported back “home.” Funding sources want to “keep score,” American style, using a Wall Street model that foolishly attempts to track God’s sovereign work on a spreadsheet. It’s the kind of attitude that leads us to forget the significance of someone like William Carey, who labored in India for seven years before he experienced his first convert. (Who is going to hire that guy!) Or Noah, who proclaimed his faith for one hundred years without adding a single person to the human cargo aboard the ark. Too often we use canned formulas, evangelistic Cliffs-Notes, demonstrating the worst of “drive-by” Christianity, rather than the richness of a holistic gospel. Sadly, Bible throwers—such as those arrested in Saudi Arabia—are growing in number, and their mistakes play into the hands of a vulnerable religious freedom abroad.

When the walls came down in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the Christian West saw an evangelistic opportunity. It was nothing short of the great Oklahoma land rush for proselytizers. Bibles were placed into the proverbial Conestoga wagon and the race was on. Western Christians tossed Bibles indiscriminately at Russia’s Orthodox community, a group that had received the Word about 1,000 years earlier! The Orthodox felt threatened,

and predictably, they pushed back: in partnership with the Russian government and the Islamic faith, they fashioned a new religious law in 1997 that tore up the welcome mat for many Western missionaries and increased the potential for Christian persecution within the country.

Finally, a faith “all about me” is a superficial faith—at best narcissistic, at worst privatized to the point of irrelevancy. Highly individualistic faith is rarely incarnated in culturally appropriate ways and never adds to sustainable solutions in difficult contexts. We need to integrate the best of our holistic faith with the intricacies of a given culture—not as compromise or spiritual syncretism, but in a way that makes our faith more attractive. Culture, by definition, is pervasive and can be negatively so. Yet culture should not be summarily dismissed as the corrupt realm of “worldly” affairs. It is the rich particularities of human cultures that provide the context for faith, societal boundaries, and the environment in which faith is exercised. Without cultural engagement, “faith” becomes totally personalized, a mere hobby or a form of therapy or, perhaps worst of all, a kind of special-interest politics. Faith that isn’t incarnated authentically in a cultural context is a selfish faith, which makes it difficult for others to relate to and which precludes the opportunity for a larger impact.

The bottom line is this. A Christian message that isn’t kingdom-focused isn’t the full Christian message at all. If it is “all about me,” Jesus can still be my Savior, but he never becomes my Lord. A partial gospel, a truncated message, is presented to the world. Make no mistake, a partial gospel is not benign. It is a counterfeit that is unworthy of the persecution it often unwittingly exacerbates.

### *Motivation*

Getting the gospel message right, therefore, is obviously important, but we must also probe deeper to consider our underlying *motivation* for sharing the message. Why do we really care? What is our motivation? Faithfulness is certainly part of the answer. We want to be faithful to the whole gospel. By extension, we want to avoid merely “a form of godliness, denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5). We wish to preclude the wishy-washy state of luke-warmness, a condition that we are graphically reminded gets “vomited out of the mouth” of a holy God (Rev. 3:16). More positively, the richness of a holistic gospel is infinitely more attractive than a counterfeit that only dissipates the strength of the original message.

There is also an anthropological dimension to missionary motivations. When people are evangelized and experience the joy of conversion, they

naturally want to share that same joyful experience with others. How we receive the faith determines, to a large degree, how we share the faith. This can be good but also carries risks if the convert-turned-evangelizer uses his or her own experience as the foundation for cookie-cutter expectations. Nations, for example, often evangelize other nations as a function of how they were evangelized. Should we be surprised when thirty Filipino Christians are thrown into a Saudi jail for throwing Bibles when such tactics can be traced to the influence of Western missions in the Philippines? Unfortunately the answer is “no.” Good intentions are not enough; it may take generations for faulty mission seeds to be leached from foreign soil. By contrast, a holistic faith, based in love and presented through the prism of the Lordship of Jesus Christ—and recognizing the enabling ability of a Sovereign to dispense such traits as forgiveness, mercy, justice, grace, and peace—will demonstrate a positive staying power for generations to come.

We are also motivated (or at least *should* be motivated) by the first rule of any global engagement: do no harm. One of the more common ways we can harm the church, for example, is to stay too long. The country of Laos in Southeast Asia illustrates the point. On the one hand, Laos has been influenced positively by the historic presence of foreign missionaries. Their stories reflect courage, perseverance, and faithfulness in the face of incredible dangers. The seeds of the Laotian church have sprung from the blood of martyrs. Today there is an indigenous church that has been tried and tested and “the gates of hell have not prevailed” (Matt. 16:18).

On the other hand, there are also problems. While some of these problems are internal (e.g., different ethnic and ecclesial bodies vying for institutional control), some issues are unambiguously related to foreign influence.<sup>3</sup> One of the most significant and insidious is secretiveness—a tendency to keep faith underground encouraged by “tentmakers” from the outside, missionaries in disguise. Interestingly, government officials almost always know who these missionaries are and where they operate. Such officials are often offended by the false “cover” of these ministries. There may come a time when this element is forced to leave Laos. This will bring the inevitable cries of persecution from the international community, and a still nascent, indigenous church will feel more fragile and alone. The indigenous church has made great strides in numbers, visibility, and legal protection. We need to keep faith with this now very public member of the Body of Christ and avoid

<sup>3</sup> These issues must be solved but the solutions need to come from within. Outsiders cannot impose solutions. That would be unworkable and unacceptable.

the unnecessarily secretive nature of an imported religion. If we fail to do so, we may irreparably harm the church.

### *Methodology*

Ultimately, then, if we are to follow Jesus' directive to be innocent and shrewd at the same time, we need to be holistic and nuanced about our *message* and *motivation*. Running through all these considerations, however, is a third "M"—*methodology*. My thesis is this: bad methodology will undermine a good message and a sincere motivation every time. Now more than ever, the church needs to take a fresh look at the issues and candidly assess methodologies of evangelism. There is an urgent need for sophisticated methodologies that ensure that the message endures yet minimize unnecessary persecution. In this regard, the place to begin is with the incarnational model of Christ himself. How well we mirror that model will determine our effectiveness as Christ's agents in the world today.

First and foremost, his was a ministry of presence. "The Word became flesh and *dwelled among us*" (John 1:14, emphasis added). Literally, he "pitched his tent" with the people. Very little of importance gets properly shared at a distance. In intimate proximity—in relationship—our own lives will be revealed. We will be living testimonies to the message we are sharing. This is especially important in some parts of the world today, where verbal proclamation is precluded. In such contexts the worth of the gospel will have to be established before the truth of that gospel can emerge. In some closed countries we need to live our lives in such a way that our behavior provokes the questions for which Christ is the answer. This is the corollary to the famous quotation from St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words."

This is not to suggest, of course, abandoning verbal proclamation of the gospel—far from it. As Jesus explained to John's disciples, the gospel needs to be *both* seen and heard. There will always be a role for verbal proclamation. Preaching, teaching, discipling are all critical components of the process of evangelism. The point is that none can effectively be done at a distance. Christian evangelism should, where possible, walk through the front door. We need to be clear with authorities, both government and church, as to how we can help and what we will do. Like Jesus, we need to be crystal clear concerning our identity.

At World Vision, for example, we would explain our various humanitarian interventions, our areas of expertise, but we always followed by saying, "if you want our *best* product . . . we will need to work with the church." An effective

model of evangelism will always maintain the highest level of respect for the people in a country. At the Institute for Global Engagement, our mantra for this behavior is “to know your own faith at its deepest and richest best, and enough about your neighbor’s in order to show it respect.” Mere tolerance is not enough. “Tolerance” inevitably will take us to a lower common denominator—forbearance but not necessarily equality. “Respect,” on the other hand, keeps the emphasis on the King, in whose image all of us were made. This we can celebrate as our common humanity, and respect helps to get us there. An incarnational model also calls on common sense for implementation. Put differently, this is the virtue of shrewdness—“be wise as serpents”—that Jesus explicitly invokes in Matthew 10:16. In addition to modeling the sensitivity, compassion, humility, and gentleness of the dove, we also need to be shrewd as the snake, which is to say, streetwise, practical, and pragmatic.

When I was in the State Department, there was a Western missionary couple briefly put in jail in Laos. Their “crime” was criticizing the government. While attempting to teach about the access we have to a holy God, the missionaries made a comparison between the freedom we enjoy through Christ and the difficulty Laotian Christians had in meeting the Lao Prime Minister. An innocent enough comparison, perhaps, but not very shrewd. The authorities reacted to criticism of their government, and the missionaries were quickly deported. But the deportation was not the most significant ramification, for thirteen Laotian Christians who were at the meeting with the missionaries would spend the next year in jail. Again, poor methodology and persecution are more closely related than is popularly understood.

Finally, an incarnational approach to evangelism will always mean that we “bear witness to hope” (1 Peter 3:15). In fact, this should be our core competency as Christians. Hope, of course, is future-oriented, but it is always made more real when we see tangible action today that points with credibility to the possibility of a better tomorrow. In the darkest days of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was asked by God to go out and buy a piece of real estate—complete with witnesses, a deed, and monies exchanged (Jer. 32:6–15). This was a tangible act and one that seemed to make no sense. But in seventy years, as God reminds Jeremiah, a captive people would be set free and returned to the land, rebuilding homes and reconstituting vineyards. Shelter and food; there is nothing more tangible, and Jeremiah’s purchase of land was designed to provide a beacon of hope during the long years of captivity. My father, at the age of seventy-five, planted a number of very small fruit trees. “What an optimist,” I said to him, somewhat mockingly. Dad passed away a few years ago, and now when I return to the old homestead, I have an option. I can go to the grassy cemetery on top of the hill and brood

over his grave, or I can eat the fruit of his trees and reflect on a man who knew a great deal about hope.

Our King understood the role of hope. The announcement of the reign of God by the incarnate Son of God was a tangible act in the present. The Kingdom and the King had come. And someday he is coming back! The “already and the not yet” will ultimately become one. In the meantime, our hopes for the future are credible and legitimate given what has already been done. And while we await his return, we can say on this day that God is *still* sovereign, the grave is still empty, and the gates of hell have not prevailed against his church. We not only have a secure future, we have elevated the most attractive component of our faith, a faith that works in the hard places, today.

Let me conclude this talk by quoting from a Chinese house church leader as he responded to Western Bible smugglers who came to China to saturate various villages with the scriptures as a means of direct evangelism—another variation of “punt, pass, and kick,” using a Bible! The smugglers “bomb” a town in China during the night with scriptures, stuffing tracts into bicycle baskets and mailboxes so that, in the words of the smugglers, “when the people woke up the next morning, there was Jesus everywhere.”

The Christian leader goes on with some passion to contradict this assumption. No, Jesus was not everywhere, because Jesus is not a book; the Bible is not Jesus. There must be a context to make sense of the Bible, otherwise it can cause heresy and heartache. Then the language gets very direct as he addresses the repercussions that followed from one of these “Bible bombardments.” The police realize that this is not the work of local Chinese Christians—they would not be this stupid. So they round up all the foreign Christians they know—many of them are teachers or businessmen. They assume these believers are the ones responsible. They harass them and in some cases, deport them. The Chinese leader then suggests an alternative methodology, and this is key: if you really want to spread Jesus, then come and spread the gospel his way—live here, learn Chinese, love the people, incarnate into the culture as Christ incarnated himself into humanity.

And then, speaking to the tremendous interest in spirituality in China, our leader gives a caution: as with all kinds of organic growth, you can’t hurry it. People take time to grow up as Christians. There is no fast track. There is no technology to speed up discipleship and no quick-fix method. Our leader’s final comment cuts right to the heart of the issue and should be the watchwords of all our discussion about proselytism and persecution: I want to suggest to those brothers and sisters, the Bible smugglers, you might be smuggling for yourselves, not for Jesus. Make sure that your desire to

smuggle is not merely a wish to have an adventure, to be James Bond for Jesus. Jesus does not need James Bond. He needs servants. He just as well might have said, "It is not about you." We need to be servants, humble stewards of the *Good News* entrusted to us. Our Lord will most certainly continue to be sovereign. And therein lies our hope for a future that avoids unnecessary and counterproductive persecution while bringing honor to his growing kingdom.

# Finding Our Way into the Future

by DOUGLAS JOHN HALL

*Dr. Douglas John Hall is Professor Emeritus of Christian Theology at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. An ordained minister of the United Church of Canada, his most recent book is Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey. This lecture was delivered as the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture at the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary in April 2006.*

The witty and provocative English Catholic thinker G. K. Chesterton once wrote: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.”<sup>1</sup> Chesterton did not mean that Christianity had *never* been “tried”—and indeed wonderfully exemplified—by many individuals and groups, including his great hero Thomas Aquinas, but he questioned whether the civilization calling itself “Christian” had ever seriously attempted to live the vision bequeathed us by the New Testament.

What this kind of generalization brings home to us is the fact that the way of Jesus Christ—the Christian ideal” as Chesterton calls it—always exceeds our actual performances as Christians. We must never be so complacent as to imagine that we’ve actually *lived* Christ’s way in our individual or corporate lives. In a real sense, the way of Jesus Christ is always still waiting to be tried.

This is true in a quite dramatic way today, as we enter a whole new phase of the voyage of the ship called “church,” and to be young today, I think, must fill those who are moved by the Christian message with an exceptional, if somewhat apprehensive, sense of adventure. *Christendom*—that form of the church that has dominated the West for more than a millennium and a half—is ending; *Christianity* once more waits to be tried. How shall we make our way into the future, as Christian people and churches, *beyond Christendom*?

One thing is certain: we shall not be able to do this without experiencing at first hand what Chesterton calls the “difficulty” of the way of Jesus Christ. There can be no easy transition from sixteen hundred years of Western Christendom to the church of the future. It is evident that a large number of Christians are unprepared even to attempt such a transition. Whether intentionally or out of habit, they seem to assume that the only way into the future for Christians is a repetition of the Christendom past, only better, stronger,

<sup>1</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London: Cassel, 1910), 22.

bigger! They set themselves, as did the Christian missionaries, princes, and crusaders of the past, to conquer in the name of Christ. But is conquering what Jesus Christ asks of us—*today*, too? How could we engage in this “conquering” without riding roughshod over the faith and integrity of others—how, in this pluralistic society; how, in this fragile planet that is already beset and besieged by so many . . . conquerors? Surely in that direction lies only strife and violence. The way of imperial Christendom has always been, potentially and actually, a war-prone way, but today—in this “global village” that earth has become—it is quite unavoidably and conspicuously so. There is not a conflict on the face of this planet that is not fueled by some religion or other, and the Christian religion, as religion,<sup>2</sup> is no exception to this rule. The “difficulty” of Christianity that we must all encounter in an original way in our time could in fact be stated in precisely these terms: namely, that unless we are able, as Christians, to discover ways of conducting our life and our mission that differ radically from the Christendom form of the church that has dominated throughout most of Christian history, we shall be doomed in the future to be part of our world’s problem and not its solution.

How, then, should we proceed? There is, I think, no single, concrete answer to that question. Many possibilities will be tried—many experiments in post-Christendom Christianity have already been attempted. No doubt many of these attempts will fail—some have already failed. But here and there new (or perhaps very old and overlooked!) approaches to Christian life and mission will take root, and eventually—very slowly, in all probability, for as it is said, the mills of God grind slowly—*eventually* it will be seen that the Christendom form of the Christian movement was only one of many possible forms—and a seriously flawed one at that!

For the present, I think, the most important step that any serious Christians or Christian communities can take toward the future is a deliberate and disciplined step in *understanding*. Like most people who feel called upon today to speak publicly about these matters, I am frequently asked, “But what can we *do*?” We North Americans have always been a practical people—activists to the core! In the face of any problem, we want to be able to act, and to do so soon—*at once!* Our brand of success as a people is perhaps greatly due to this kind of practicality. But mere activism does not help, and in fact it often greatly hinders, where a whole spate of planetary problems are concerned, problems that have become, in our time, the most pressing—includ-

<sup>2</sup> I assume the distinction, made by Bonhoeffer, Barth, and many others, between “religion” and “faith.” While faith may never be found without some “religious” wrapping, it is necessary intellectually and spiritually to distinguish the two. Religion is a “grasping” (Barth); faith is being grasped.

ing the great instabilities of economic and other forms of injustice, war, violence, and the degradation of the natural order. All such problems are only exacerbated by the kind of let's-do-something approach that I ascribed, in my previous lecture, to the Henny-Pennys of our society. Act we certainly must; but *pertinent* acting, *judicious* acting (for Christians, *obedient* acting) presupposes the often much harder work of *thinking*, including that form of thought that is called prayer.

Years ago, I saw a poster put up in the most unlikely place—a Protestant church!—that read, “Don’t just *do* something, *sit* there.” This, I believe, is the first requirement for any Christian person or congregation or denomination today that wants to find a way into the future. *Thought*—original, deep, critical, theological thinking—is the *conditio sine qua non*—the condition without which the Christian movement will not find its way into the uncertain future. Another word for the kind of thought of which I am speaking is the much-misunderstood word “theology.” Ours is a time when *theological* reflection and labor is the most important thing Christians may do if they are in earnest about their future.

More to illustrate what I mean by this than to exhaust its meaning, I want to comment on *three key areas of Christian theology* as they might contribute to our endeavor to move beyond Christendom to new ways of understanding our life and mission in a post-Constantinian, religiously diverse, and humanly challenging social context. The three areas are *Christology* (what we understand by the person and work of Jesus, the Christ), *Anthropology* (what Christians think about human nature and destiny), and *Ecclesiology* (how we conceive of the church and its mission). I have no intention here of attempting anything comprehensive. I only want to suggest ways in which the contemplation of these three areas of Christian doctrine can evoke from us inspiration and courage for the journey ahead, particularly when it is undertaken (as real theology must always be done) in dialogue with an intentional and informed awareness of “the signs of the times”—the *Zeitgeist*, the “context.”

### JESUS, THE CHRIST

We begin at the beginning—indeed, at the very center of the Christian confession, namely, our confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ. As we reflect on this confession, we remember that—*today!*—in a way that was not true of the Christendom past, we do so as citizens of a society in which precisely this confession is no longer *everybody’s* confession. Of course, it never was, in reality. But in the Christendom situation, which managed to

extend itself on this continent well into the twentieth century, it could *seem* to be a nearly universal assumption. Courts of law, the human rites of passage, commerce, public ceremonies, and the like—all could assume a certain openness to the name Jesus Christ, or, if not exactly openness, certainly a grudging recognition. Today, apart from isolated pockets of our population, this is no longer the case. High percentages of the populations of Western countries may and do still claim some connection with the Christian religion, but serious Christians in these once-monolithically Christian nations realize that they are in a minority situation where earnest and thoughtful attention to this name is concerned. How, then, should we work out our understanding of the high significance of this name in such a way, on the one hand, as to avoid falsely offending those who do not belong to this particular household of faith and, on the other hand, so as to engage those who are on the edges of faith or are at least curious whether something good may still come out of Nazareth?

Well, let us begin by recognizing that Christianity stands or falls on its confession of this name. Whatever humanistic critics may say, or however one may react to Christian fundamentalism, it remains that Christianity is by definition committed to the confession that Jesus is the Christ.

I cannot improve on the way that this was stated by my great teacher Paul Tillich, whom no one could accuse of being a right-wing theologian! Tillich, in the second volume of *Systematic Theology*, writes:

Christianity is what it is through the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth, who has been called “the Christ,” is actually the Christ, he who brings the new state of things, the New Being. Wherever the assertion that Jesus is the Christ is maintained, there is the Christian message; wherever this message is denied, the Christian message is not affirmed. Christianity was born, not with the birth of the man who is called “Jesus” in the moment in which one of his followers was driven to say to him, “Thou art the Christ.” And Christianity will live as long as there are people who repeat this assertion. . . . The Gospel, reduced to its simplest form . . . is the statement that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ.<sup>3</sup>

*Within* the confession that Jesus is the Christ (and it is a confession, not a fact of scientific investigation) there is, of course, a great deal of room for interpretation. There always has been. Mark’s theology of the Christ is not quite Matthew’s; John’s mystical Christology is different from Paul’s more

<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 97.

historical-scriptural approach, and so forth. Interpretation is both varied and reflective of the differing personalities and historical contexts of the interpreters. But whenever people start wanting to have Christianity without Jesus as the Christ, they beg the question of their own identity as Christians. Why bother with the name "Christian" if the name from which that nomenclature derives is no longer significant for one? Christianity is not just a moral system or a worldview; it is a faith. And at the center of this faith stands the figure of the crucified one whose Spirit calls the disciple community into being. This is minimal; this is basic.

But this confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ must not be turned into the kind of single-minded *fixation* on Jesus Christ that knows no other dimension of the being and acting of God. Christianity is *centered* in Jesus Christ—it is "christocentric." But it is not "christomonistic."<sup>4</sup> That is, it is not exclusively or narrowly Jesus Christ with which this faith tradition concerns itself. The reality that we call "God" is a mystery transcending even what we know of God through God's self-manifestation in the Christ, and no testimony to God's transcendence is more compelling than that of Jesus himself. As I once heard Bishop J. A. T. Robinson put it (and I think the formulation is clarifying), "Jesus is not all the God of God there is."

One of the finest theologians ever to have emerged in North American history, H. Richard Niebuhr, feared that in far too much American Christianity Jesus *was*, however, being presented precisely as "all the God of God there is." It was Niebuhr's informed sense that popular Christianity—especially in the United States—had been reduced to what he called a "unitarianism of the second person of the Trinity." God the Father and God the Spirit are pushed into the background by a conception of the Christ that is so all-embracing that it requires no other reference. In many versions of the Christian message on this continent, where media-driven religion reduces everything to very simplistic slogans, Jesus is simply presented as God. The declaration, "Jesus is God," can be heard with great regularity every day of the week, twenty-four hours a day.

This is nothing short of a failure of Trinitarian theology. The only people in the early and developing church who indulged in the bald and unqualified declaration that "Jesus is God" were declared to be heretics: sabellians, monophysites, docetists, and the like. Yet this kind of ultradivine Jesus, replacing God, and himself virtually devoid of any real humanity, has nearly become the new orthodoxy for popular Christianity in our midst. And of

<sup>4</sup> Dorothee Sölle used to say that she found much Christianity in North America a kind of christo-fascism.

course it begets an equally extreme reaction, so that we have the resurgence of a kind of ultraliberalism that in the name of Jesus *humanity* tends to rob this name of any transcendent significance.

Niebuhr's approach maintains Jesus' transcendent significance for Christian faith without indulging in exaggerated and unbiblical declarations concerning his deity. Jesus, said Niebuhr, *reveals* God to faith. His relationship to the Creator ("the Father"), however it may be spelled out, should not have the effect of dispensing with "the Father" in favor of "the Son." Jesus himself certainly did not put himself forward in that way, but, as the author of Philippians phrased it so memorably, though he could claim identity with God, he "humbled himself and became obedient, even to the point of death on the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

Why is it so important that Christians today and tomorrow recover this Trinitarian conception of the centrality of the Christ? It is important in the first place because it seems far closer to the original testimony of the earliest church—the church prior to its establishment, for we have to realize that the church's pronouncements about the Christ *after* Constantine's adoption of this faith were serving high *political* and not only theological ends. As the religion of empire, Christianity was under a certain obligation to present its central symbol, the Christ, in as grandiose a manner as possible. Not the suffering messiah, the crucified "man of sorrows," representative of a creator who suffers with the groaning creation, but rather a glorious and heroic figure, God incognito, elevated to ultimate power after a brief humiliation: that is the kind of Christ who serves the purposes of empire. The Christian future calls for a recovery of the earlier Christology, prior to Christendom's false and misleading elevation of Jesus. The truth is, surely, Christendom made Jesus so high and mighty that it effectively undid the gospel's declaration of his being "God *with us*"—Emmanuel. In the name of upholding Christ's divinity, imperial Christianity effectively diminished the central New Testament teaching of the Incarnation.

But besides being truer to the original, the Trinitarian conception of the Christ proposed by Niebuhr is terribly important for any possibility of a Christian mission that today includes (as it must!) dialogue with other religious faiths. In this social context, where we brush shoulders daily with persons of other religious persuasions, the glorious, powerful Christ-of-Christendom can only offend and alienate these others. St. Paul rightly insists that there *is* an "offense"—a scandal—in the Christian message. But the scandal Paul has in mind is not the idea of a powerful messiah who in the very grandeur of his person excludes and humiliates others. Rather, it is the scandal of a messiah who, contrary to everybody's expectations of divinity,

enters into complete solidarity with the suffering world and seeks to change the world, not by force, but by the weakness of his radical compassion—*agape*.

In our kind of global village, as Marshall McLuhan called it, triumphalistic, exclusivistic claims for Jesus Christ on the part of Christ's less compassionate followers can only lead to greater human discord and, increasingly, to global violence. By comparison with the arrogance of a Christological dogma that insists on being endorsed by all who can have any part in salvation, Niebuhr's conclusion seems to me closer both to truth and to love, as Christians understand these. Niebuhr wrote, "I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given to people outside the sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence of something like Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

I conclude, then: we are indeed bound to a confession of faith that is centered in Jesus, the Christ. But we shall only engage our world at the level of its reality and its deepest longings if we come to realize that Jesus Christ, in his living personhood, is far more accessible to suffering humanity than are most of our inherited doctrines of Jesus Christ and that he is already present in our culture in many ways and in places where he is not explicitly named. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the future that awaits thoughtful and sensitive Christians today is found just here. For, as Bishop Richard Holloway expressed it, "The fascinating thing about our day is that, as the political and theological structures of Christendom crash down before our eyes, we can see once again, through the rubble and dust of the centuries, a clearer picture of the prophet of Nazareth."<sup>6</sup> Note well: it is *Jesus* that we see through the dust and rubble, not the Formula of Chalcedon or the Nicene Creed!<sup>7</sup>

#### THE BEING AND PURPOSE OF HUMANKIND

The second area of Christian teaching that demands fresh and critical thinking today and can help us into the future as a faithful and prophetic people is Christian anthropology. If as Christians we want to *engage* our culture, and not just *reflect* it, we shall have to submit to a profound rethink-

<sup>5</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: The Continuing Imperative," *Christian Century* 77 (1960): 249.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What Is Left of Christianity?* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), 172.

<sup>7</sup> I mean no disparagement of either; but we need to remember that before "Christology" there was Jesus, called "the Christ" by the fisherman Peter.

ing of what it means to be human—truly, authentically human. And in particular we shall have to ask, “What is the human vocation in a biosphere of diverse and delicately interrelated creatures and processes?”

In a way, this area of Christian doctrine is more vital, ontologically and ethically, even than Christology—though it is also inextricably bound up with our understanding of Jesus Christ, whose humanity, after all, represents for Christians a paradigm of what Chalcedon called *vere homo*, true humanity, genuine humanity. Christology remains central, but our anthropology as Christians is quite directly and immediately paramount for our engagement of our culture today. For we find ourselves in a world where nothing is more confusing to human beings than is their own species. What our civilization taught us to call *homo sapiens* (the wise creature) is today under serious threat—from within. “We have met the enemy, and it is us!” We began the twentieth century with an unprecedently high image of ourselves as a species, a Promethean image; we ended the century with Sisyphus, the Greek mythological figure condemned to meaningless and endless busy-ness. What is being questioned, in fact, is whether there *is* any sort of human “being” distinguishable from other sorts of beings, and even if there *is*, whether such beings as we may be said to have any real purpose.

One of the most perceptive authors of our geographic context states that the question by which we are confronted today, phrased in its most rudimentary form, is simply: “What are people *for*?” That is, in fact, the title of a remarkable book of essays by Wendell Berry, the American philosopher and essayist. In the title essay of that book, Berry relates that “a psychologist who has frequently worked with the juvenile courts in a large Midwestern [American] city, has told me that a major occupation of the police force there is to keep the ‘permanently unemployable’ confined to their own part of the town.” “One wonders,” muses Berry, “what the authors of our constitution would have thought of that category, ‘permanently unemployable.’” And he comments:

The great question that hovers over this issue, one that we have dealt with mainly by indifference, is the question of what people are *for*. Is their greatest dignity in unemployment? Is the obsolescence of human beings now a social goal? One would conclude so from our attitude towards work, especially the manual work necessary to the long-term preservation of the land, and from our rush toward mechanization, automation, and computerization. In a country that puts an absolute premium on labor-saving measures, short workdays, and retirement, why should there be any surprise at the permanence of unemployment and

welfare-dependency? These [apparently] are only different names for our national ambition!<sup>8</sup>

Berry, in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, lives close to the land and laments the displacement of people by complex machinery. But other thinkers contemplate (some of them with glee) a world in which the messy, unpredictable human element has been supplemented, or perhaps replaced, by yet more complex machinery. Let me quote a few lines from an essay by one, Ray Kurzweil, a leading American technologist. His essay "When Machines Think" was published in *MacLean's Magazine* in 1999.

While ordinary humans like us have to acquire knowledge "painstakingly," says Kurzweil (and please note the language he uses), "if one computer learns a skill or gains an insight, it can immediately share that wisdom with billions of other computers. So every computer can be a master of *all human and machine acquired knowledge*." As we progress through the twenty-first century, he insists, the clear distinction between human and machine will increasingly disappear. "By 2030," Kurzweil calculates, "it will take a *village* of human brains to match a \$1000 computer. By 2055, a thousand dollars of computing will equal the processing power of all human brains on Earth. O.K. [he modestly admits], I may be off a year or two."

Will these future machines be capable of having spiritual experiences? [Kurzweil asks] Oh, they'll certainly claim to. They will claim to be people, and to have the full range of emotional and spiritual experiences that people claim to have. And these will not be idle claims; they will evidence the sort of rich complex behaviour that one associates with these feelings. How do the claims and behaviours—compelling as they will be—relate to the subjective experiences of these reinstated people? We keep coming back to the very real but ultimately unmeasurable issue of consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Well, at least this technocrat seems ready to admit for the time being that in his words "*consciousness* presents something of a problem." But what is one to make of the equation, in his discussion, of "data" and "information" with "knowledge," "insight," and even "wisdom"? And what of the equation of electronically "processing" this information with "thinking"? Is everybody ready to accept such equations?

Unfortunately, it would seem, large numbers of our contemporaries *are* prepared to do so, or at least they raise no questions about such prognoses as

<sup>8</sup> Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), 124–25.

<sup>9</sup> Ray Kurzweil, "When Machines Think," *MacLean's Magazine* (1999).

Kurzweil's. Most people today are so overwhelmed by the marvels of technology, and so out of touch with what the founding cultures of our civilization (both Jerusalem and Athens) meant by such terms as "reason," "revelation," "thinking," "knowledge," "insight," "wisdom," and a whole host of concepts associated with what it is that human beings at their best are "for," that they fail to hear any alarm bells in such analyses as Kurzweil's. The equation of information with knowledge and wisdom, an equation articulated daily and hourly in our media-driven society, seems not to concern most of our fellow citizens, including most alleged intellectuals. When *thinking* is equated with *calculating* and the manipulation of myriad "data," computers already have the advantage over our ponderous human brains. So there is a silent—but not so very silent—suspicion among us today that human beings are embarrassingly unimpressive—except perhaps as creators of those clever machines that seem poised to replace us. And one suspects that the callous treatment of the young in our society is just an extension of the low estimate of humanity in our technologically fixated society.

One of my favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut, that American literary seer whose ironic humor often hides from the unperceptive his prophetic insight, once wrote a sort of parable about this situation. To my mind, it says everything. Situating his vignette in a fictional planet he calls "Tralfamadore," Vonnegut writes:

Once upon a time on Tralfamadore there were creatures who weren't anything like machines. They weren't dependable. They weren't efficient. They weren't predictable. They weren't durable. And these poor creatures were obsessed by the idea that everything that existed had to have a purpose and that some purposes were higher than others.

These creatures spent most of their time trying to find out what their purpose was. And every time they found what seemed to be a purpose of themselves, the purpose seemed so low that the creatures were filled with disgust and shame.

And rather than serve such a low purpose, the creatures would make a machine to serve it. This left the creatures free to serve higher purposes. But whenever they found a higher purpose, the purpose still wasn't high enough.

So machines were made to serve higher purposes too.

And the machines did everything so expertly that they were finally given the job of finding out what the highest purposes of the creatures could be.

The machines reported in all honesty that the creatures couldn't really be said to have any purpose at all.

The creatures thereupon began slaying each other, because they hated purposelessness above all else.

And they discovered that they weren't even very good at slaying. So they turned that job over to the machines, too. And the machines finished up the job in less time than it takes to say Tralfamadore.<sup>10</sup>

(That last line always reminds me of Jacques Ellul's observation in his great study of *The Technological Society*: "Nothing equals the perfection of our war machines.")

Christianity, whatever else may be said of it, has a very high conception of human being and purpose. This fact is sometimes obscured by the negative aspects of traditional, theological anthropology, which, unfortunately, some historical theological traditions have accentuated much too one-sidedly. But the doctrine of sin ends in anthropological pessimism only if it is isolated from the perspectives on the human condition that derive from the doctrines of creation and redemption. Sin, in fact, confirms the high anthropology of the tradition of Jerusalem, for it insists that what is *intended*—what humanity has fallen from, and what must be and is being restored to it—is an essence and a vocation of the highest order. The human being is described biblically as the special creation of God—not as being *better than* the rest of nature, but certainly different, and with a special "stewardly" role within the creaturely sphere. The human being in this tradition is in covenant partnership with God—is the thinking, choosing, planning, responding dialogue partner of the Creator for the sake of all the other creatures and, as such, is the object of divine pathos and suffering love.

It therefore belongs to any honest and wise representation of the Judeo-Christian estimate of the human to resist *any* reduction of human beings, old or young, to random, superfluous, and purposeless things. And if there are Christians who are at this moment in time reveling ecstatically in the wonders of cybernetics, then they had better be helped to realize that the complex gadgetry they are too thoughtlessly celebrating is the product of a mindset that is very different from that of the Psalmist who wrote, "When I consider the heavens . . . , what is man that thou art mindful of him?"

I do not advocate that everyone who professes Christianity should be a Luddite (though the story of the Luddites is seldom told with any sympathy); but to go along without a thought, without a question, with what is occurring under the vainglorious nomenclature of "communications" is to display a naïveté unworthy of both Socrates and Christ.

<sup>10</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* (New York: Dell, 1970), 274–75.

Eventually, and at long last, Christians are going to have to come to terms with the technological threat to their whole system of belief and to our culture at large. Naively, too many Christians have imagined that science is their enemy. But science, in its profoundest expressions, both knows its own limits and lives intimately with the mystery of ultimate truth. It is not science, but technology—the profligate and amoral and usually profit-driven offspring of science—that poses the threat, and it is an extraordinary threat wherever the human beings who ought to have been and could have been more critically vigilant have lost touch with their own sources of critical insight. If the churches were half as excited about the threat to civilization posed by a communications industry in the hands of a hundred multinational corporations as they are about gay and lesbian ordination, they might have something genuinely prophetic to say to our North American society.

As Christians, we are stewards of an ancient wisdom—yes, wisdom—that believes in the meaningfulness of creation, including the trouble-making creature that is its articulate center, *because it believes in a loving God who suffers with and for creation*. It is precisely this wisdom that our culture desperately needs. The drift toward purposelessness, and the self-destruction that attends that drift, can be stemmed only by those who remember, and are touched by, images of the human that are older than the flashy, technocratic image that Western modernity pursued so single-mindedly. Among those who remember the older conceptions of the human, Christians and Jews ought to be—and could be—prominent. And if we pursue faithfully and imaginatively our own biblical traditions of anthropological hope, we shall certainly find others, of other faiths, with whom we can make common cause. We would come to realize, for instance, that the most serious among thoughtful Muslims today are not so much protesting “the West” as they are protesting the rampant technologism and consumerism that has captured Western peoples and inspired them to transform the globe through their bogus religions of technique and consumption.

#### THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

A third area of Christian theology where greater clarity and intentionality must, I think, be achieved if the church of the future is to engage our culture theologically is, of course, our own self-understanding as church and our mission as such. Who are we, and what is our mandate, our vocation? This is such an immense field of discourse that I shall have to limit myself to two basic observations: one about the being, the other about the mission of the church.

The first is this: Surely the Christian community that is being edged out of its entrenched position as part of the dominant culture must try to recover something of the dynamic or fluid or organic nature of the church that informs biblical testimony to the Body of Christ. No matter how we may try to base our various ecclesiastical structures and polities on biblical precedent, it remains that the early Christians did not think (as we are prone to do) *institutionally*. They thought of themselves as a *movement*. To be sure, they had to organize themselves, and before the establishment of the fourth century there were various systems, including organized ministry, in place. But Christianity as institution and, after the Reformation, as a whole spate of separate and competing institutions does not belong to the original concept. The commanding metaphor in the pre-Constantinian church was the metaphor of movement. They saw themselves as a *communion viatorum*, a “people of the way,” a community in transit, en route.

It is a fascinating image: to be *in via* is to exist in a frame of mind quite different from that of the institution. Everything is geared toward movement. The goal lies ahead, so you know you have not yet arrived—you are only on the way. You hope it is the right way, but you do not have certitude about that—the certitude of those who think they *have* “arrived.” Confidence you may have, but not certitude.

Moreover, Christian community as movement involves a quite different form of belonging than does the religious institution. In the institution you belong by going through the various stages of membership, paying your dues, learning your lines, committing yourself to the upkeep of properties (because institutions always require a lot of property), contributing to the salaries of those who serve the institution full time (as we say), and so forth. In the movement, on the contrary, belonging is through participation. There will undoubtedly be ceremonial and financial and housekeeping responsibilities, but the measure of your belonging is located in the breadth and depth of your involvement in the faith that has inspired all these things and the worldly commitment that is its ethical consequence.

As in any movement, the Christian movement permits participation that is greater or lesser in extent. Some, in any movement, are at the center, some are the *avant-garde*, some are in the rear guard, some are only watching the parade from the sidelines—though they may at any moment join in, depending upon what they see and hear. There is, in short, a fluidity, a back-and-forthness here between the Christian community and the surrounding culture. The lines of distinction are not drawn indelibly between the avowedly sacred and the apparently secular.

Something like this ancient metaphor of movement needs to be recovered, I think, if the Christian movement is to find its way into the future beyond the impasse of institutional Christianity. Precisely because membership is no longer automatic; precisely because decision is involved now in a new and existential and ongoing manner; precisely because faith is and will be sustained not by tokens of institutional identity but by disciplined thinking and concrete commitment, the institutional model of the church no longer fits the realities of the post-Christendom era. Perhaps if ecumenism was less concerned about the union of tired, old institutions and more concerned about the calling of the Christian movement in the world as a whole, ecumenicity itself would be more vital to all who take this faith with some degree of seriousness. Perhaps, too, the world would manifest more curiosity about a church less concerned for buildings and numbers and its own survival and more vulnerable to the suffering that affects all creaturely life.

The second point is: What about the *mission* of a post-Constantinian Christian movement, a *diaspora* church? Here, we would do well to consider the metaphors that Jesus actually applied to his “little flock” and its worldly purpose—metaphors that have played far too little role in the ecclesiastical reflections of Christendom for the obvious reason that they are not metaphors of power and majority status! The disciple community, said Jesus, is to be “salt,” “yeast,” “light,” a “city set on a hill” (before the age of electricity!). These are not grandiose images of Christ’s church. They are descriptions of little things—little things that have to do with quality, not quantity, and little things that do something for big things: salt that seasons an otherwise insipid plate of McFood, yeast that causes the cultural dough to rise a little higher, light that persists in illuminating dark places.

After existing for some fifteen hundred years as the dominant cult of the dominant culture of the West, such images as these seem paltry to the mindset that thinks the only way to influence a culture is to turn the whole of it into church! We are so humiliated today by the decrease in membership, finances, and influence in high places that we seem impervious to the challenge to genuine mission contained in these simple metaphors of Jesus’ teaching. We tend to assume that we could be about the work of God in the world only by achieving a majority status and making a great deal of noise. This is quite contrary to the Bible’s wisdom, which knows not only that minorities matter greatly but that majorities should nearly always be regarded with high suspicion. In the election theology of Scripture, only minorities can do what majorities never have done and never will do—such as being vigilant on behalf of the *victims* of the

majorities (and majorities—including allegedly *Christian* majorities—always create victims!).

This is not, I think, a time for aggressive evangelism. “Been there, done that!” But the alternative to aggressive evangelism is not passivity. There are ways of expressing Christian faith and discipleship that do not falsely offend and humiliate other people or substitute a quest for power for a quest for truth, justice, peace, and love. Most of these ways have to do with what may be called the *befriending* of the world—the compassionate caring for human and other creatures and processes that is signified by the foundational category of Christian ethics, *agape*—suffering love. Such “befriending,” whether on the part of individuals or of the church as a whole, is not just a means to the end of explicit Christian witnessing. It is in itself enough that such work is done, such compassion shown, such justice undertaken. But if it is done with sufficient consistency, wisdom, and human sincerity, it will raise in some people—in enough people—the question, “Why?” For to express real hope in concrete ways in our overtly and covertly despairing world is to invite that question. Genuine hope—hope in word and deed—does not explain itself. As the first epistle of Peter says, true hope begs an accounting for.

The mission of the Christian movement in the West during the twenty-first century will have to be confined largely to that kind of creative indirectness. We Christians, who have imposed ourselves and our faith on so many, for so long, must now earn the right to explain the reason for our hope. Normally, no doubt with exceptions, we shall have to wait to be invited by our world to say who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. But that, in the end, may prove a far more lasting and faithful testimony to the God of Bethel and of Bethlehem than all the forced baptisms, tent-meeting conversions, and proselytizing bombast of the centuries.

In conclusion, I personally can think of no more stirring and energizing time in which to live the Christian life—or (remembering Chesterton) seriously try to do so—than right now. We stand at the far end of a form of the church that was based on the quest for power. We know, if we are observant, that power does not serve the ends of a God whose way is that of love. The way of love is “difficult,” as Chesterton rightly affirmed, and we would be naive were we to imagine otherwise. But it can be undertaken—“tried”—today and tomorrow by a chastened church that has found out how very inadequate and misleading is the way of power.

Casting the ballast of the centuries overboard and setting the sails of the ship of church into the gusty winds of the twenty-first century after Christ, your generation may go far. I hope you do so. *Bon voyage!*

# Joy Unspeakable in an Unspeakably Joyless World

by BARBARA A. HOLMES

*Dr. Barbara A. Holmes is Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean and Professor of Ethics and African-American Studies at Memphis Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tennessee. A former corporate lawyer, she was ordained in the Latter Rain Apostolic Holiness Church and is now a member of the Disciples of Christ Church. Her most recent book is Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church. This lecture was delivered as the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture at the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry held at Plymouth Congregational Church in Seattle, Washington, in January 2006.*

Though now you do not see God, yet believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

1 Peter 1:8<sup>1</sup>

Joy has nothing to do with material things, or with a person's outward circumstance . . . A person living in the lap of luxury can be wretched, and a person in the depths of poverty can overflow with joy.

William Barclay

What happens when you find joy unspeakable in an unspeakably joyless world? Does it change the world; does it change us or God? When I speak of joy, I refer to an exultation of body and soul that extends far beyond our ordinary pleasures.

This is the true joy of life, the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clot of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can.

George Bernard Shaw<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am quoting the KJV version of the Bible to capture the unique expression “unspeakable joy.” The NRSV used by many scholars uses the phrase “indescribable and glorious joy.”

<sup>2</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, in *Epistle Dedicatory* (New York: Penguin, 1903), 32.

This is the first part of a pretty amazing quote from the creative Irish playwright and political activist George Bernard Shaw. And although he didn't intend it to do so, it also describes the life of Esther in the phrase "my life belongs to the community." But this type of dedication doesn't just pop into existence. We may dream about greatness and glory, we may just desire a bit of joy, but ultimately the best manifestation of the individual occurs when personal desires are ensconced within the embrace of shared needs. It is out of these shared needs that the theme for this lecture series arises.

#### BEAUTY IS AS BEAUTY DOES: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Joy is the ground on which mysticism and aesthetics make connection, for both are in reference to beauty.<sup>3</sup>

It isn't every morning that you wake up and find yourself involved in Persia's version of a Top Model/Concubine Contest. The theme for this lecture series comes from the book of Esther, and although the king seems to be asking for a "beauty contest," there will be no volunteers. Instead, beautiful young women like Esther will be compelled to service the king as part of his conscripted harem.

The king needs a compliant beauty, the Hebrew people need a courageous deliverer, but can we expect all this from a pretty teen? We don't expect much from handsome men and pretty girls. We don't teach them to expect much from themselves. Old folks used to say, "Beauty is as beauty does." They had less confidence in the reflection in the mirror than they had in the strength of inner character and faithful action.

Esther will find herself in a position to reflect a different type of beauty, a beauty that emerges from selflessness, courage, and choices critical to the survival of an entire community. Ironically, although the story is purportedly about an involuntary beauty contest, it is what the beauty does and not how the beauty looks that is the focus of the narrator's interest.

This interest is encapsulated in the phrase that everyone remembers from this story, which is found in Esther 4:14. Here Mordecai says, "Who knows but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this." The verse summarizes age-old questions about purpose and destiny. But because this is a biblical story, we don't consider the critical context for Mordecai's statement.

Let's test the meaning of this famous phrase by translating the events into current times. Presume that the king is a politician, statesman, or military

<sup>3</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 175.

person for that matter. Would anyone consider Colin Powell's wife capable of "delivering her people" through her relationship with Colin? And yet Esther is given this heavy and rather odd responsibility. To further understand the weight of this responsibility, one must fully understand the nature of Esther's relationship with the king. This is a party king who has desecrated the symbols of the temple and lured faithful people to participate in the desecration.

Esther is his orphaned, exiled teenage consort who is not even remembered by her given name, Hadassah (which means hidden). If we didn't already know how the story ends, we would not consider her to have the potential to change history. But it is exactly those factors that become extremely important in determining how she becomes the heroine of a very problematic story.

#### EXILE: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CREATIVITY

I imagine that the royal order for a state-sanctioned kidnapping in the guise of a beauty contest comes while Esther is minding her teenage business, hanging out at the well with her friends and doing her hair. Although rumors have it that the previous queen caught an attitude with the king and was quickly dispatched, Esther is in exile and knows how to survive under the radar. Some may think of her as hoochie-mama, a loose woman-child willing to trade her body for the comforts of the palace, but things are not always as they seem.

She is not given a choice—exiles seldom are—so she makes the best of it. The truth of the matter is that she is in survival mode when her life begins to unfold along unexpected paths. Seeking unspeakable joy in a joyless world while God is hidden and you are in exile is no easy task. Exile is an exotic word, one that does not have much power in our lives. And yet, all of us at some point in our lives are exiles from God's embrace and from the safety of extended families.

You can be in exile in the middle of New York City if you are homeless, or in a rich suburban school if you are poor. You can be in exile if you are alienated from the embrace of a nonresidential parent, or struggling to survive as an undocumented worker in a sweatshop. Exilic living seems to be unmoored from the common rhythms of daily life and even of the culture, but you certainly get a different perspective on things. You hear what the majority doesn't hear, and your sense of awareness is more acute. Instead of using this new vantage point, we tend to blame others for our sense of rootlessness.

New Testament scholar and activist Ched Myers notes that the disintegration of the American family is not a result of alternative family lifestyles; rather it is the exilic nomadic existence that capitalism requires that destroys families. We become exiles and nomads as we leave the land to follow the jobs. It happens in ways that are hardly noticeable. Meyers suggests that first the husband was taken from the family farm to work in the market economy, and then the wife was taken from the home to work for the market, then only the market was left to care for the children and the elderly.<sup>4</sup>

And so we become exiles from the idea of landed generational connections that gave "joy" and provided the fertile base for all our human endeavors. But one cannot simply detach people from their beliefs, traditions, and connections without offering them something in return. That "something" at the beginning of the twenty-first century seems to be the pursuit of pleasure and comfort at any cost.

Because we are now people whose identity does not include the land or generations of wise elders; the stories of our experiences, exploits, and incongruous encounters must provide the framework for our ministries. Esther is an unlikely deliverer and an example to youth that leaders don't always sport gray beards.

### THE SURPRISE OF UNLIKELY LEADERSHIP

Those of us who teach and support youth tend to err in one direction or another. We either presume that young people have no power and fail to recognize the God-given role that they can play in the struggle for justice, or we presume that they are better equipped than they are, and we send them off to fight Goliath without three smooth stones and the knowledge of God.

The better path is to teach young people that they have the ability to change history, that no matter what life path they have taken so far, they can serve God, their communities, and their families in powerful ways. Neither teen pregnancy, drug addiction, nor alienation can deter God's calling and promise. In every circumstance, there is the opportunity to transcend the ordinary, to reclaim joy in a joyless world.

William H. Chafe, in the analysis of key figures in American public life, comes to the conclusion that it is the personal details of their lives that give clues about the ways in which they engage history. He identifies the interplay of family circumstances, choices made when challenged, and personal crisis as

<sup>4</sup> Ched Myers, ethics class discussion, Spring 2000, Memphis Theological Seminary, Memphis, TN.

determinative.<sup>5</sup> But this is the point: Our effectiveness as committed members of wider communities does not occur because we know how to make the right choices at the right time, and not because we are married or dating the right people, but because we are known by a God who redeems our mistakes and amplifies our good.

Esther's story reminds us that it is courage and prophetic action, not age or experience, that saves communities, and that youth is no impediment to greatness. David begins his path toward a God-gifted destiny as a teen, as do Mary mother of Jesus and many others named and unnamed. Even when Esther intends for her life to reflect nothing but survival, she embarks on a path that will take her toward her destiny.

As noted by Thich Nhat Hanh, "Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy."<sup>6</sup>

Human beings respond to what life deals them in various ways, some healthy, some not. Insecurity, bitterness, ambition, overcompensation, social climbing, solitariness—these are among the many ways in which we attempt to normalize ourselves in what is, in truth, a world of abnormalities.<sup>7</sup>

The three ideas that I want to highlight in this lecture, which foster joy unspeakable in an unspeakably joyless world, include nurturing the God potential in unlikely people during unlikely circumstances, having the courage to transgress false boundaries, and finally finding the source of our own refreshment.

### NURTURING THE GOD POTENTIAL

God potential doesn't have a "look" or attitude that is clearly recognizable. Instead, it emerges in the most unlikely people during the most unlikely times. Do you recognize the God potential in yourself and others? It isn't always easy. If you didn't know how the stories end, you might miss the God potential in the Christmas manger or even on the cross. One need not be born to save the world; one need only be willing to try when asked.

Often we miss our opportunity to serve because we are rehearsing our mistakes. When we consider our past, we can't believe that we are useful to

<sup>5</sup> William H. Chafe, *Private Lives/Public Consequences: Personality and Politics in Modern America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Yardley, "A Distinguished Historian Examines Why Pivotal Personalities Make Crucial Choices," *Washington Post Book World* (November 27–December 3, 2005), 2.

God. But we are wrong about this. The greatest examples of moral character in the Bible come from the lives of unlikely people who are willing to trust the divine spark within.

The question is asked, “Will you go to the king?” when everything hangs in the balance. What will you risk to save others or advance their cause? The question comes from Mordecai to Esther but is also addressed to us. Would you be willing to lose your life to gain it? Will you stand in solidarity with the poor and exploited communities of the world? As it turns out, neither comfort nor survival are the greatest values in New Testament ethics. Sometimes we survive and sometimes we don’t, but the only way to enhance God potential is to risk everything on the faithfulness of God, even when God is hidden.

The one chosen to risk everything in the book of Esther is an unlikely teenage girl. Look in the mirror. You are also an unlikely candidate for greatness, but the potential is clearly there. Our ability to serve is directly connected to our cognizance of authentic selfhood. In my recent book *Race and the Cosmos*, I say that “when we are not authentically in touch with self, we cannot respond in any meaningful or responsible way to society.”<sup>8</sup> Each of us has God potential in us because each of us bears the image of God. The question becomes whether or not we will seek safety and ease or nurture the spark of divinity within until it becomes a splendid torch, a light to all the world.

#### TRANSGRESSING FALSE BOUNDARIES

Just when I think I understand people around me something they do or say baffles me. The whole person exceeds those parts I comprehend . . . We see the subuniverse through glimpses of its shadow, the world of our experience. At each sighting, some of it lies out of view. It unfolds only in part. What we know and will know of reality fails to exhaust it . . . This inexhaustible depth of nature, its unfathomableness, opens us to the Divine’s mystery.<sup>9</sup>

Kevin Sharpe makes an important point. We are always more than the sum of our parts. It is this transcendence in body and in spirit that leads to the second opportunity to find joy in an unspeakably joyless world. Transgressing boundaries speaks to the invitation to break out of the boxes that so carefully contain our limited options. I want to be clear that I am not

<sup>8</sup> Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Sharpe, *Stealthing the Divine: The Nexus of Science and Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 76.

advocating the invasion of personal boundaries necessary to healthy communities. Rather, I am seeking critical engagement, discernment, and faithful action beyond expected contexts.

I use the word “transgress” for lack of a better one. But I am really talking about “becoming” who we were always meant to be. God’s conception of our options and abilities far exceeds the safe terrain that we usually inhabit. Transgressing allows us to understand ourselves as interconnected and whole, no matter what the circumstances are. For those who don’t like breaking rules, this may be a more comfortable entry point for a type of leadership that encourages us to color outside the lines.

Our joy is tied to our freedom, and our freedom is seeded in a God-given liberation that has nothing to do with socially constructed ideas about our race, gender, sexuality, or class. Once we see ourselves as children of the universe, all else is a matter of alignment. In this cosmological view, one need not exhaust oneself in ongoing scrimmages with discrimination and oppression. These are false constructs, paper tigers in a living system that we call earth. When we resist oppression from the broader perspective of cosmological consciousness it fades without a battle.

The story of Esther ends with the embattled Jewish people rising to defend themselves and then going beyond defense to slaughter. To battle evil is to be drawn into the mythology that violence is a viable tool. It is not. All that is needed is that we speak truth to power, live lives that fly low under the main paradigm<sup>10</sup> (living simply in a culture of excess), and treat the earth as if it is a viable member of a living and interconnected sociospiritual system.

Our task is to align body, mind, and soul with the God of the universe. All else will follow. Activist and prolific cultural critic bell hooks offers this:

My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know.<sup>11</sup>

What keeps us from being the best that we can be? What limits, false or real, hinder our sense of fulfillment? Only the prisons in our minds can accomplish that task. For those who are marginalized, as Esther was, the first task is to envision your own wholeness. The first act of resistance is the

<sup>10</sup> A frequently used phrase of Old Testament scholar Walter F. Brueggemann when he was teaching in 1993 at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA. This interpretation of the phrase is mine but is one that comports with his intent.

<sup>11</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xiv.

reconfiguration of your own self-esteem. People who are conscious of their connections to the cosmos will not be deterred from full exploration of their gifts because true liberation includes the ability to conceptualize freedom beyond social configurations.

The restoration of a social order gone awry begins with the vision of self and community as embedded and vital to the continuance of a universe that is intelligent and intelligible. Restoration comes when we remember that we are articulated stardust, bearing in our bodies the story of the universe and engaging the mysteries of the Creator.

#### FINDING THE SOURCE OF OUR OWN REFRESHMENT

The third and final category requires that we pause to drink living water from deep wells. The joy spoken of in Holy Scripture requires deep connections to spiritual power that is always beyond our reach. African American gospel music speaks of the intrinsic “beyondness” of this joy by saying “the world didn’t give it and the world didn’t take it away.” The refreshment of the human spirit occurs during moments of amazement, bliss, and communion with God. Dorothee Sölle says it best:

The soul needs amazement, the repeated liberation from customs, viewpoints and convictions, which, like layers of fat that make us untouchable and insensitive, accumulate around us. What appears obvious is that we need to be touched by the spirit of life and that without amazement and enthusiasm nothing new can begin.<sup>12</sup>

Because our attention spans are short, a world within our reach would bore us to death. We are refreshed by the things that amaze us. Materialism and consumerism are poor substitutes for the refreshment of spiritual joy. If we teach young people nothing else, we must certainly get this message to them.

A few years back, when Bill Cosby was asked about how he would keep teens from killing other teens for their sneakers, he said: “Change the object of their desires.” He was calling for a panoramic vision of the world that necessarily takes a person beyond the neighborhood, beyond familiarity, and beyond the shoes on their own feet.

The source of our refreshment or our joy will come as we search and journey, stopping along the way to give aid and to listen for the whisper of the Holy Spirit as it leads into all truth. When we reach the end of the journey, I am confident that we will have “joy.” Here is the last part of the George Bernard Shaw quote that began this lecture.

<sup>12</sup> Sölle, *The Silent Cry*, 90.

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me, it's a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.<sup>13</sup>

When we have finally found joy in service, in commitment to community, in the restoration of the earth, we won't have to shout to the rooftops that we have found joy. All who care to look will be able to see our splendid torches, as a sign of grace and unspeakable joy to an unspeakably joyless world.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 32.

# For Such a Time as This

by PATRICK D. MILLER

*Dr. Patrick D. Miller is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he taught for twenty-one years. He is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Dr. Miller's most recent book is *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, edited with Sally A. Brown. This lecture was delivered as the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture at the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry held at Plymouth Congregational Church in Seattle, Washington, in January 2006.*

I want to focus this lecture on the theme of this conference, which comes from a verse of Scripture, indeed a very well-known biblical verse. Furthermore, it is a kind of climactic moment in a story that from my childhood to right now remains for me one of the most fascinating and compelling stories of Scripture. I never knew as a child that God does not appear in the book of Esther. I'm not sure I would have thought that was necessary. Or maybe there was a childish naïveté that did not presume one needed to have God speaking and acting in a story of Scripture because God was always around. In fact, I have returned to that naïveté in my old age, but I will come back to that.

I never knew that the book of Esther was to be regarded as on the margins of Scripture precisely because it did not seem to tell us much about God. Of course, it is about a woman, so it is not all that surprising that the story is often marginalized. In my Old Testament introduction courses, I gave it about ten minutes in the whole semester. In that respect I was consistent with the rest of the history of interpretation, which has given sparse attention to the book and in the Eastern tradition did not even regard it as canonical. Luther, who, you may recall, was quite free about the canon, was perfectly willing to toss it out altogether. The Greek translation cleaned the book up a bit—and made it more acceptable—by adding verses that frequently mention God.

So we have for this lecture series not just a theme but a text, and as I have thought and written I have found myself constantly being drawn back to the text, stopping to read something in the story again, not able to avoid the constraints of the text or its tremendous opportunities and possibilities. All of which is to say that in this lecture, I want to speak again about time, consistent with the theme for such a time as this, but I am going to do so very

much out of the context and listening to the resonances and reverberations of the text that has given us our theme.

I know the story of Esther is familiar to us, but because the text or theme is so rooted in the story, one cannot avoid a brief recapitulation. Esther's story begins as another woman's ends. It opens as the king of Persia gives a prolonged and lavish banquet, a virtual orgy of food and drink that lasts for days. In the midst of this orgy he summons his beautiful Queen Vashti to show her off. She rather impertinently refuses to come, presumably aware of why she is being summoned. For that she is banned forever from the king's presence, and he and his servants begin the process of finding a beautiful young bride to take her place.

Esther, an orphan, a Jew, a virgin, and a beauty queen, is the one chosen. There are two other characters in the story—Esther's older cousin Mordecai, who adopted her as his daughter, and a high official of the king, Haman. There was friction between them from the start, especially when Mordecai refuses to bow down before Haman, as the king had ordered. Haman uses this incident to go after Mordecai indirectly but horrendously. He persuades the king to decree the destruction of all the Jews (and thus get Mordecai) and the plunder of their goods. (Reading this story as a child during World War II, I immediately identified Haman with Hitler, totally unaware of how close the comparison really was.) Here is where the Shoah really begins in Jewish history. And here is where our text is set and where Esther's story lodges. For Mordecai, like his fellow Jews, in great anguish and fear, sends a copy of the decree to Esther and asks her to go to the king and make supplication and entreaty for her people, the Jews. She points out to Mordecai that anyone who goes to the king without being summoned is put to death unless the king holds out his gold scepter toward the one who enters. In the only place in the book where Mordecai is actually quoted, he then says these words to her:

“Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you insist on keeping silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Esther goes to the king’s court. He extends the gold scepter, allowing her to live and make her request. That request is for the king and Haman to attend a banquet she is preparing. At that banquet, when the king offers to grant whatever her petition is, she simply asks them to come back to a second banquet.

Meanwhile, Haman is unaware that Mordecai had earlier found out about a plot against the king and by revealing it through Esther saved the king from

assassination. So just as Haman is about to get the king to decree Mordecai's death, the king unwittingly preempts that move by asking Haman how best to honor someone in the king's favor. Thinking the king has him in mind, Haman proposes a lavish reward, in effect, clothing him in royal robes and parading him around as the king's favorite. Only at that point does he find out that the one to be honored is Mordecai. So Haman knows then that he cannot get the king to order Mordecai's death, as he had planned. At the second banquet, when Esther reveals Haman's plan to destroy all the Jews, the king reacts in anger and has Haman executed. Because the king cannot rescind his decree, a new decree is sent out allowing the Jews to defend themselves when they are attacked. They do this effectively and in the ensuing celebration create the feast of Purim as an annual celebration of the event.

That's the story and the text from which come our theme. So where do they take us? I think they take us in several directions. To follow some of those pathways, I want to discuss four things: time, Esther, Mordecai, and God, who, you remember, never shows up in the book.

I begin with *time* because that is where we left off in my first lecture, and it is also still very much the subject matter before us, though not in the same way as in Ecclesiastes. There is only one other use of the word for time in the whole book of Esther outside this text, but here Mordecai speaks of time twice: "If you insist on keeping silence *in this time*," and then in his climactic question: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for *such a time as this*." It is this moment, a propitious time, not like any other time, one filled with danger and promise, with risk and great possibility. One may read these two references to time as simply facets of the story. They are indeed that, but they also outrun the story. They are what takes the story beyond its own time and place to make it both timely and timeless. No other verse in this book is likely to have presented the planners of these days with a theme for some concentration.

I would pay close attention to each of Mordecai's references to time. In the first instance, he raises the issue of *keeping silence in this time*, that is, in a time such as this. Esther, he suggests, is now in a position of great moment. But it is not quite that contentless or neutral a time. There are all sorts of critical moments in time. What is significant about "this time" to which Mordecai refers? The answer is clear. It is precisely a time when one may not keep silent: "In this time," when imperial power threatens a whole nation, when hatred is turned into political plots to do in a people, when there are members of the community whose well-being and lives are in danger, "if you insist on keeping silence." This is not any time. It is a time for two things, if I hear

Mordecai correctly. It is a time for risking and for speaking, for risking to speak, for risking to speak in behalf of her people. The book of Esther is about many things: a beautiful young Jewess who becomes a Persian queen, the origins of a Jewish festival, the subversion of an evil man's plot against one and against many. Yes, it is all these things. But at its heart it is about not keeping silent, about a young woman's willingness to risk everything—her position, her life, everything—to see if she can save her people.

As I read and reread Esther's already familiar story and listened to Mordecai's words to her, I could not help but think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge's reporting how Bonhoeffer responded to the events of the German pogrom remembered as Krystelnacht, when the German SS troops destroyed thousands of Jewish shops, nearly two hundred synagogues, and hundreds of Torah scrolls; began the Aryanization of Jewish property; and took 20,000 Jewish men to concentration camps. It appears as if Bonhoeffer kept silence at such a time. But, in an essay titled "One of the Silent Bystanders?" Bethge notes two small items that point in a different direction.<sup>1</sup> One is the only marginal note in Bonhoeffer's Bible that has to do with anything other than a parallel passage or hymn. It is in the margin alongside Psalm 74:8 where he penciled "9.11.38," the date of the Krystelnacht pogrom. That verse reads:

They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them"; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

It goes on: "How long, O God, is the enemy to scoff." This was the psalm that Bonhoeffer and his students were reading that day in the clandestine seminary where he taught. He saw a direct connection between the Jews of that earlier time of deportation and exile and the events of the preceding day. A few days later he sent out a circular letter to all the former seminary students, although circular letters were forbidden by the German government. The letter had already been prepared, but, Bethge notes, he inserted one sentence relative to the events of November 9, 1938: "During the last few days, I have been thinking a lot about Psalm 74, Zechariah 2:8, Romans 9:3f, and 11:11–15. That really makes one pray."<sup>2</sup> The Romans 9 and 11 passages have to do with the mystery of God's way with Israel. The other Old Testament text, Zechariah 2:8, says with regard to Israel, "the one who touches you touches the apple of my eye."

<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Bethge, "One of the Silent Bystanders? Dietrich Bonhoeffer on November 9, 1938," in *idem, Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 58–71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

“During the last few days,” Bonhoeffer wrote. “In such a time as this,” Bonhoeffer did not keep silent. His letter and the Scriptures he quoted were a call to his seminary students to rethink at their depths the anti-Jewish instincts in which they had been nurtured, even as members of the German Confessing Church. Bethge argues also that this was a turning point in Bonhoeffer’s thought and action. Let me read what Bethge wrote with regard to the sentence in the circular letter:

Two things in particular must have concerned him. First of all, the role of the ordained preacher of unbounded salvation in a church which existed and exercised its office so far from the hunted Jews. Can this role be fulfilled without solidarity with them? Can one continue in this calling without some changes?

Second, it seems to me that Bonhoeffer’s attention was caught by the double “how long” of Psalm 74. When will there be an end to the pogrom? How will an end come about? What role will fall to me in it? What will be the cost to Christians of having allowed things to come to the point of November 9?<sup>3</sup>

Today we know what his answer to the question of the Psalm turned out to be: beginning in 1940 he collaborated in the failed conspiracy against Hitler that eventuated in Bonhoeffer’s death.

#### NOT TO KEEP SILENCE, EVEN UNTO DEATH

So if we have to ask what characterizes “this time” as the story of Esther addresses us, it is a time when keeping silent will not do, when hiding is not an escape, when speaking out is risky but the only way to change things, to oppose power, to resist oppression. Bonhoeffer not only confronts me as an example of a later voice that would not keep silent in the face of oppression of Jews; he also makes me ask if I can read Scripture, including the book of Esther, as he did, that is, as prayer, and see if Mordecai may be turning his head to look at me with his words about keeping silent in “this time.”

But, of course, Mordecai follows up his challenge to Esther with a second word about time: “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.” If Mordecai’s first reference to “this time” serves to identify the time as one when keeping silent is not an option, his second reference has to do with discerning the possibility that this time was made for you and you were made for the time. It is obviously a time of crisis and great

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 67.

danger, but Mordecai's question presumes that and probes deeper to ask if the contemporary situation may not be a time to find your calling, why you are here, to use the situation and circumstances in which you find yourself for the common good. To all intents and purposes, Esther, you came to your place as queen because you won the beauty contest and the king fell in love with you. So it would seem; that is what has happened. But who knows? Maybe this is why you became queen. Perhaps you have come to the throne not to enjoy all its wonderful benefits and accoutrements but to take advantage of your place and position in behalf of a larger good, to save your people.

So on the surface, but importantly, the "time like this" is one of crisis and endangerment of the Jewish people. Yet at a deeper level, a time such as this is a time for not keeping silent and for finding one's calling in the midst of one's circumstances. Recently I read a letter a young man had written in applying for a job. Here is part of what he said: "Education in our country has fallen behind what it needs to be. Yet it is through education that we persevere intelligently, productively, and gracefully with the rest of the world. Through education our poor can gain more and be able to leave poverty behind. Through education our contributions to science, medical science, global trade, local communities, local and federal government can flourish. Only through a large, sincere, and long-term commitment to education can we hope to regain lost ground and bring about a better life for many American citizens and other peoples. I believe my responsibility now goes beyond that which I may have held to any business I created or for whom I have worked. I hope the skills I have developed can be useful in behalf of that greater responsibility."

I think that letter is precisely a way of asking if he has not come to the kingdom for such a time as this, if he has not found "in this time," which he clearly defines in his words about education, his true calling, why he is here, and toward what end all that has happened before is leading. Who knows?

But let me come back to Esther. She is, after all, not only the one to whom Mordecai's words about time are directed. She is also the central character of the book. We learn some things early on about her. She is young, an orphan, a virgin, and very beautiful. One would infer as well that she has a lovely personality. The admiration is clearly for her beauty, but there is more as well. This young woman finds herself moving from orphan to queen and thus being drawn into the circles of power and intrigue. That is, in part, the result of planning, intention, and desire—on her part as well as that of her cousin Mordecai, who adopted her. That is all part of the story and interesting to read. What catches us, however, is the way in which time and circumstance draw her into dimensions of her role she never expected. That is what

happens in "such a time as this." The movement of the story, of course, and what is meant to catch our attention, and does indeed do so, concerns how this young person lives and acts when thrust into circumstances of great consequence for which she is unprepared. Very few young people, any more than Esther, can know ahead of time when they will find themselves in such a time as this. How will they know they have come to their place for such a time as this? How will they act? How does *she* act? Well, this is just one old story. But because it is clearly didactic, one must ask if there are not features of the story and Esther's role that are paradigmatic and instructive for "such a time as this." Let me suggest a few:

1. Such a time as this requires both *realism* and *courage*. That is evident all through the report of this young woman's response to what happens. Herismi may finally characterize her act, but her perspective is quite realistic—about herself and her situation. That is evident at several points in the story. For one, she reacts to the news of the lamenting of Mordecai and the Jews with her own terrible anguish. She literally writhes in anxiety when word reaches her about what is happening. She may be queen, but these are her people, her adoptive father. Their trouble tears her apart. She may be queen, but she is human and lives in relationships from which she does not separate herself. Furthermore, she is realistic about the possibilities and reminds Mordecai of the risks she faces if she dares to try to intervene. Her confrontation of the reality before her reaches its height when she concludes, "I will go to the king . . . and if I perish, I perish."

So in this case, at least, in such a time as this, being realistic calls for courage on this young woman's part. Living in a world of luxury and wealth and sitting on top of the heap and fully aware, she risks everything for her people. "I will go to the king though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." I wonder if we have not removed from our practical notions of discipleship the expectation of risk and the possibility of daring. But that may be because we do not see discipleship as countercultural and against the stream. We are at ease in Zion, so why be daring. I do not assume that risk is a constant feature of the Christian life. What I wonder is if we assume at all that we need to be prepared "for such a time as this" when risk and bravery in the face of real danger may be required. Where does that come into Christian nurture?

2. In such a time as this, Esther's story suggests that what is needed is the joining of *wisdom and faith*, of sensible thinking with commitment to the faith and practices that have kept the community through thick and thin. I have tried in my mind to separate these, to think of good sense as one thing and keeping faithful as another. But the story really does not allow that, and so I

may need to change my way of thinking. The young may survive and flourish when they plan *and* pray. When Mordecai's question comes to her—"Who knows?"—we read that she says: "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night and day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king. . . ." One commentator says of the verse that "it sounds like a battle plan, and she is clearly the general" and notes that in the next verse Mordecai goes away and does all that Esther told him. We also hear in the following chapters of Esther's daring plan, the two banquets that seem strange—why not do it in one banquet?—yet clearly serve to lead the king ever more willingly to give her whatever she wants. She has used her beauty, her good sense, and some careful planning all in a courageous risk of her status and even her life to try to save her people.

But I hope you noticed how the "battle plan" began—with the three days of fasting on her part and all the other Jews in the capital of Susa. Remember this is supposed to be a secular book, so we are not to read anything too religious here. However, this fasting is probably a penitential rite, and as one scholar has hesitantly said, Esther is probably dependent upon God's gracious response.<sup>4</sup> Lest, however, we think we are sticking our necks out too far with such an assumption, the Greek addition clarifies things for us by placing a long prayer on Esther's lips. Prayer and planning. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). I think that is the first verse my parents taught me: to pray in reverence and use my head. Maybe that is why they were always quoting either the Psalms or Proverbs. They knew that as a young person I needed to learn both ways and that those two ways were really only a single path by which I might make it and be faithful: good sense and the love of the Lord. Is this what that very wise man Paul meant by being foolish for Christ's sake?

3. In such a time as this, the young person of this story knows that in her relation to her elders she is both *bound* and *free*—bound to listen and free to act. Or to put it another way, the young listen to their elders but have to find their own way. The story of Esther centers around precisely that juxtaposition. Her obedience of Mordecai from her youth to the present is noted in the text (2:20). He has guided her through the years and given her direction. That direction is crucial now as well. For it is he who uncovers for her what time it is. It is Mordecai who throws down the gauntlet. But it is Esther who must take it up. And as her being bound to Mordecai is not slavery but a

<sup>4</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

relationship, so her being free is not license or abdication of responsibility—quite the contrary. Her freedom is the freedom of responsibility to find a way, to take the lead, to risk and dare. (And Mordecai knows that. He lays the charge on her to go to the king and entreat his mercy. He helps her see her strategic place and calling in such a time as this. But she will have to work it out. Within two verses of his question, “Who knows?” we hear that “Mordecai then went away and did everything Esther had ordered him” [Esther 4:17].)

This takes us more specifically to Mordecai. For it is the dynamic relation across the generations that is the real key to the book of Esther. Mordecai is the older generation, the substitute parent and teacher. I have noted that although there are several reports of actions and messages sent by Mordecai, the two verses that are our focus—where he addresses Esther about keeping silent in such a time as this and asks if perhaps such a time as this is why she has come to royal dignity—are the only quoted words of Mordecai in the whole book. I assume this is because there is something fundamental in the two parts of his words to her. His counsel is a mix of realistic assessment of the situation and its dangers and possibilities and a challenge to act. He helps this young person understand what is going on and challenges her to see in this time and place her calling in behalf of a larger good.

So where is *God* in all this? We have already noted that there is no reference to God in the whole of the book. But from the earliest supplementary texts of Esther to the present generation of commentators, there has been unease and dissatisfaction at writing God out of the book. If God is present and at work in this story, that presence and agency are hidden. We do not even have a Joseph to interpret God’s hidden and providential work for good where others are doing evil. Yet many aspects of the story are intimations, coincidences that belong to the general claim at the center of the story: Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. That is a claim; it cannot be documented. It is itself a pointer to God’s providence. And what we hear in it is precisely an openness to the question and a willingness to stake our life, our work, our place in this world on that possibility. The question may not always be applicable. But it should stay in the background and come to the fore at critical points, none of which can be anticipated. Are Mordecai and Esther in some sense like Joseph, God’s agents in this story? I could work with that. It is not something one can say with any proof or even confidence. Esther suggests a possibility in our acting we need to allow for without ever being sure, that God indeed works in a mysterious way, through us as human agents for the human good, to make

and to keep human life more human, to rise to the occasion in such a time as this.

I have been reading this story against the backdrop of our common interest on this occasion—a faithful ministry among and to the young people of the church. As I do so, I puzzle, and expect you do as well, as to whether this is about you in your ministry or about those young people you lead and guide in such a time as this. I have decided we should just live with that puzzle or confusion. Who knows?

# Loud Shouts Count

by HAROLD J. RECINOS

*Dr. Harold J. Recinos is Professor of Church and Society at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. An ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, his most recent book is Good News from the Barrio: Prophetic Witness for the Church. This lecture was delivered as the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture at the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary in April 2006.*

**A**t the age of 12, I became very aware that the vocabulary field of established culture maintains, shapes, and arrests social relationships by its power to define who belongs in the social body and who deserves rejection. I grew up in the South Bronx. It was a tough place, a crucified place at the edges of society whose young people in the official language of dominant social and educational institutions get represented in the kind of pathological terms that mobilize government indifference and rejection from religious communities.

Before I hit my teens, I was living on the streets in abandoned tenements, twenty-four-hour movie houses, city parks, and parked Greyhound buses, responding to the pitiful conditions of life around me by becoming a junkie. During the four years I was on the street, the language of representation used by public intellectuals and religious leaders alike demonized street kids and silenced their cries for quality education and resources to participate in the wider society.

At first, shooting heroin, dope, chiva, horse, junk, smack was not about taking the alluring drug described by William Burroughs in *Junky* (1953), nor was it the so-called genius-making drug idealized by jazz greats such as Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, or John Coltrane, among others. Dope enabled me to go through restaurant garbage dumpsters in search of food to eat along with other homeless outcasts. It made it easier to drop out of junior high school. Junkiedom empowered me to beg others for money; wear the same clothing for months at a time, never noticing the stench; and sleep in the filth of condemned Bronx tenements. Often, on cold winter nights alone on the rooftops, I wondered why in the barrio where a crucified people lives so many churches deserted the mission that “complete[s] what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col. 1:24).

One bitter night in a windowless abandoned building, I read these words from a pocket Bible: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by

name, you are mine" (Isa. 43:1). As I lay awake that night—a junior high school dropout, abandoned, criminalized by society's politics of representation—I knew God was leading me out of death into a world where my identity was not simply a social problem, a world where individual despair would be examined in light of the massive inequalities of a social order that denied youth a future. As I wrestled with my abysmal conditions of life, I discovered that claiming a Christian voice required engagement in the real life struggles of those persons who have a special place in God's vision of a new humanity—the sad, the oppressed, the poor, the crucified, the rejected, the strangers, and the outcasts.

On the streets my life was consumed with learning how to stay alive each day. I did not want to end up with a knife in my heart like my friend Pee Wee. I was lucky to have survived one stabbing—a sign to me that childhood had come to an abrupt end. I never surrendered the dream of going back to school. I met a Presbyterian minister who had discovered the God of the oppressed while active in civil rights marches in the sixties. His interpretation of the following of Jesus directed him to the barrio to engage in street ministry with junkies. Most of the junkies on Home Street were suspicious of him. I thought he was truly insane for coming to the South Bronx. By then I was a seasoned junkie who believed the language of "salvation" was a joke—good news for the comfortable and better off but a waste of time for the poor and nearly dead! All I wanted from him was a new set of clothes, a good meal on occasion, and money to get a fix. I did not want to be bothered about a "radically new possibility" for life in Christ! But he welcomed me into his family, got me off drugs, got me back in school, and showed me how to be in relationship with God.

I have been involved in theological education for about twenty years now, engaging in anthropological investigation of popular religion in Central American society and teaching students to use the social sciences to articulate their leadership for the sake of the church in a changing world. But I must confess to you that it was the streets of the South Bronx—the birthplace of hip-hop culture—that taught me to confess to a God who offers salvation by giving life to people who live in life-denying conditions. I can tell you that young people at the edges of society who are systematically disadvantaged by poverty, lack of education, and discrimination are not uniquely lawless, reckless, and threatening. These young people and the popular cultural forms that have come out of their so-called worthless neighborhoods have a great deal to say about their crucifying world.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz notes that one of the most significant aspects about the human condition is that "we all begin with the natural

equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in having lived only one."<sup>1</sup> As I think about this very basic anthropological insight, I cannot not help but wonder what it is that shapes the lives of young people and causes them to choose certain paths in life over others. I am concerned today that we know too little about what it means for youth to develop their lives in a society that sees basic freedoms abridged, social problems criminalized, the helping functions of society declining, and a government imagined as a protector from crazed terrorists expanding policing functions.<sup>2</sup> I am also troubled by the many ways that youth are denied a hearing within the larger culture of the United States and their voices of dissent against militarism, racism, and economic exploitation are shut down.

How might youth feelings of agency and alienation from the wider cultural meaning system result in new ways to think about the meaning of community and thinking that produces a culture of questioning? I explore answers to this question by first discussing the cultural terrain within which youth acquire their system of meaning for ordering experience and generating behavior in society. I situate youth in our wider youth-marginalizing culture, highlighting certain negative societal functions that impact the activism and identity of youth. Second, I discuss a way to find God in the details of youth popular culture, which I understand to be a public site of learning that provides a voice and an alternative sense of cultural agency to young people. I begin by discussing the social context of young lives and saying something about the external forces shaping them.

### CONTEXTUAL ASPECTS OF YOUTH CULTURE

We have good reason to worry about how young people are growing up in American society. They are growing up with guns and drugs in schools, entertained by violence and crime on television and film, increasingly aware of the lies they inherit from society, impatient with the political duplicity and corruption of elected officials, misdirected by our capitalist culture of consumption, dying of AIDS, manipulated to support an unnecessary war, and misunderstood by adults who exclude them from conversations about the responsibilities youth have for the future of society. Henry Giroux observes, "If not represented as a symbol of fashion or hailed as a hot niche, youth are often portrayed as a problem, a danger to adult society or, even worse,

<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Henry A Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

irrelevant to the future.”<sup>3</sup> This so-called “generation of suspects” should not be silenced, discounted, or prevented from negotiating the uncomfortable truths of their world.

I am not talking about youth as a biological or psychological stage of human development on the way to adulthood. Youth is a cultural idea that suggests the need to seriously consider the social and cultural practices young people use to act on the world. I remind you that the 1960s racial justice and antiwar movements showed young people actively renewing the moral outlook of adult society. Youth challenged social values and practices at home and abroad in the name of justice and a vision of shared social responsibility. Today, youth are also finding ways to tell adult society that life together should not be constructed from a vision of shared fear but in light of a questioning culture of justice. To begin, let’s briefly chart the cultural terrain of ultimate meaning forming the background to the life experience and cultural agency of youth in American society.

The religious environment of the world young people live in is changing in ways that challenge the assumption that modernization and scientific rationality will replace religious worldviews.<sup>4</sup> Religious beliefs and practices have not been driven out of modern life or the mind of individuals; rather, they have increased and established new and various realignments between religion and culture. This cultural fact has given rise to a revised secularist view in which religious sociologists are busy arguing not only that religious decline varies across Western societies but also that religion matters.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, religious beliefs and practices over the last fifty years have changed, as reflected by individual concern to reevaluate the meaning of the sacred.<sup>6</sup>

The church has lost its spiritual monopoly over believers and individuals who have grown restless with the inability of congregations to meet their spiritual needs and are seeking to deepen their religious experience by visiting new age bookshops, inventing new languages of faith, or picking up clues about spirituality in films and on television and the Internet.<sup>7</sup> In other words,

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Berger, “The Desecularization of the World,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Hunt, *Religion in Western Society* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 23.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> See especially Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds. *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

not only are young people growing up in a society where religion matters but their spiritual sensibilities are not limited to any one place or religious tradition. Religion has never been more important in American society than it is now, but the detail of the new religious awakening shows that God is found in various places in popular culture. Young people are growing up in a society where persons are increasingly opening up to the way the sacred becomes visible in the complex variety of human experiences. Nonetheless, the openness and tolerance to the plurality of religious experience does not necessarily mean youth unfold a deeper knowledge of human difference and theological identity.<sup>8</sup>

If the new religious climate of society changes the way young people appropriate religious meaning, what about the economic and political context of growing up in the United States. Youth are growing up at a time in American society when political leadership celebrates the triumphs of the marketplace while the economic prospects of most young people grow dim. From the time the teenager was socially invented, in the first half of the twentieth century, until the baby boomer generation, Americans expected that each new generation would do better, but the free market fundamentalism of the present is now producing hard economic conditions. What is going on? Among industrialized countries, the United States is ranked first in the number of millionaires and billionaires, yet the poverty rate for children is higher than that of any industrial nation. Although the United States is one of the richest democratic nations in the world, it ranks seventeenth among industrial nations in efforts to lift children and youth out of poverty.<sup>9</sup>

The government policies that allow a relative handful of private interests to control most of social life are behind the growing social and economic inequalities youth experience. For instance, political policies such as lowering taxes on the wealthiest one percent of the population, deregulating environmental protections, transferring public funds to the defense industry, and divesting public education help maximize the personal profits of a small wealthy class. Researchers at the Children's Defense Fund studying the social conditions of children and youth created by current political policies note:

The Bush administration's budget choices before and after September 11th leave millions of children behind, favor powerful corporate interests and the wealthiest taxpayers over children's urgent needs, widen the gap between rich and poor—already at its largest recorded

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 228.

<sup>9</sup> Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, xvii.

point in over 30 years, and repeatedly break promises and fail to seize opportunities to Leave No Child Behind. While thousands of children, parents, and grandparents stand in unemployment and soup kitchen and homeless shelter lines waiting for food and a stable place to live all across America . . .<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, young people who experience economic hard times pull back on hope and question leaders who say the market will eventually spread the spoils of the good life.

Market fundamentalism places a premium on buying and selling and producing citizen consumers as well as devaluing the democratic culture championed by schools, civic organizations, family life, churches, neighborhood associations, and voluntary associations of various kinds. Not surprisingly, youth then are growing up in a society driven by market relations "über alles"; indeed, the organized political activism that upheld the deepest values of our democratic tradition and expanded the right to vote, women's rights, civil rights, labor rights, and the rights of racial minorities appears to appeal to the indignation of only the opulent elite of U.S. society. Sadly, the political authoritarianism of the current presidential administration teaches young people that citizenship and community "demands not courage, dialogue, and responsibility, but silence and complicity."<sup>11</sup> It appears that too many adults and political leaders discourage youth to take seriously the political idea of the public good, which seeks to expand people's claim on the politics of life together.

In short, the political, economic, and spiritual culture framing the experience of young people in U.S. society is in need of a theological leadership willing to address aggressive nationalism, finance capitalism, authoritarian government, and seeker spirituality. I want to suggest that in the details of youth popular culture, theological leaders will find resources for ministry. In particular, I think rap music as a form of popular youth culture has the potential to offer a new cultural, political, and religious language of questioning that helps us think about the world in a way that is critical of political arrogance, religious hypocrisy, and economic injustice. Among the messages carried in this popular cultural form, one finds a strong opposition to the condition of oppressed suffering and economic exploitation and a more internationally encompassing vision of freedom, community, and human

<sup>10</sup> Children's Defense Fund, *The State of Children in America's Union: A 2002 Action Guide to Leave No Child Behind* (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund Publication, 2002), v.

<sup>11</sup> Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, 4.

rights. Let us now more closely examine rap music as a resource of youth social and theological identity.

### SHAPING A CULTURE OF QUESTIONING

The margins of society manifest a unique variety of popular youth culture that promotes cross-cultural interactive dynamics, which help youth unfold a deeper understanding of difference and lofty notions of human community. The hip-hop culture that originated with youth of color in postindustrial New York City, for instance, has become a powerful form of youth understanding and social identity. As a cultural style enjoying international popularity, hip-hop is a cultural meaning system brimming with youth agency and a creative questioning of the commonly held value system of U.S. culture and religious tradition.<sup>12</sup> If baby boomer parents today lament the death of Abbie Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, Jerry Garcia, Jerry Rubin, William Burroughs, Timothy Leary, John Lennon, and Jimmy Hendricks, they should celebrate the new counterculture in the making that is more multiracial and gender inclusive.

You may wonder why I want to hold up rap music as a form of youth theological and political discourse, especially considering that it has been subjected to fierce criticism from many parts of society, argued about in U.S. Senate hearings, and blamed for “allegedly fueling violence, drug abuse, and a general devolution of character.”<sup>13</sup> Critics such as Bill O'Reilly, William Bennett, and C. Delores Tucker, who think rap is morally bankrupt, ignore the fact that rap music is not monolithic; instead it reflects a range of forms, spanning from gangsta rap to gospel rap.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the critics of rap music who insist it only reflects a culture of depravity overlook the social and political contexts from which rap music and hip-hop culture emerged.<sup>15</sup> I think something good comes from rap music, and the issues that deserve our attention are the existential concerns and material conditions expressed in this popular musical genre, which in part provides a voice of social criticism to young people.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Mary Bucholtz, “Youth and Cultural Practice,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 525–52.

<sup>13</sup> Heidi A. Hendershott, *School of Rap: The Politics and Pedagogies of Rap Music* (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2004), 22.

<sup>14</sup> See Anthony Pinn, ed. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Early rap music provided a commentary on inner-city life such as growing unemployment, drugs and violence, poverty, and the disintegration of social relationships among the people who daily faced hard conditions of life. The observational rap music that

Rap music is a powerful cultural practice that came forth from the experience of Puerto Rican and African American youth in their early teens and twenties.<sup>17</sup> As popular culture, the history of rap reflects a social practice of boundary crossing to produce conversation among different classes of people and to function as a powerful pedagogical text that enables youth to raise questions about themselves and society. Although rappers began their cultural practice excluded from the white, middle-class world, white youth eventually embraced and grew up on rap like “kids grow up on Similac.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, this popular cultural form builds interethnic and multiracial bridges that have implications for how adults in congregations identify theological resources and raise questions from a youth perspective about the current condition of society.<sup>19</sup>

Rap music has been closely examined from an African American perspective by Anthony Pinn, Evelyn Parker, Cornel West, and Michael Dyson, among others. These academics reject the idea that rap music lacks social importance and is best understood as a macho, misogynist, homophobic, violent expression of thug culture. For instance, West describes early rap as the expression of black youths disgusted with the “selfishness, capitalist callousness, and xenophobia of the culture of adults, both within the hood and society at large.”<sup>20</sup> Dyson’s important book on rapper Tupac Shakur—*Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*—situates Tupac’s music in the wider context of post-civil rights social and political culture and the concern to claim a cultural space to express a sense of injustice.<sup>21</sup> Parker considers the musical genre to be a way for African American youth to embrace a wisdom tradition for humanizing black identity.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile,

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initially came out of the South Bronx made it clear that the barrios and slums were nothing less than an “ethnoracial prison” where structural conditions of life in a racist society assured diminished life chances for making it.

<sup>17</sup> Rap music is part of a wider so-called hip-hop culture that includes dancing, graffiti, fashion, and stylized speech.

<sup>18</sup> Raquel Z. Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 171.

<sup>19</sup> Although a great deal of ink has been used to explain rap music as an exclusively black American ethnomusical innovation, not only was it the product of black and Puerto Rican youths, but I think it is best understood as the expression of the “cultural hybridity” of the postindustrial urban world. In other words, it is not, strictly speaking, black music or Puerto Rican music; rather it comprises the sounds of a multiracial, multicultural, and multilingualistic world.

<sup>20</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 179.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Parker, “Singing Hope in the Key of Wisdom: Wisdom Formation of Youth,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*, ed. Anne Streaty Wimberly and

Pinn argues for the need to understand the theological and spiritual importance of rap musical forms. These researchers do, however, overlook in their discussion the rich history of African American and Latino cross-cultural exchange that first gave rise to rap music.<sup>23</sup>

Rap is not simply a form of black youth genius but a genre of music born in a fluid multiracial and multicultural space. As a product of youth cultural practices, rap music began in the slums and barrios of New York, where African American and Puerto Rican youth gave expression to their collective historical experiences. In the post-civil rights era, rap music developed first as an African American and Puerto Rican popular musical genre responding to the conditions of life created by dehumanizing Reaganomics, the crack epidemic in the inner city, capital flight and jobs exportation, the decline of public and low-income housing stock and gentrification passed off as urban renewal, the disintegration of inner-city schools and mainline religious life, and growth of refugee and immigrant communities from Central America and the Caribbean resulting from U.S. support of military regimes and economic policy. I think early black and Latino rappers were street prophets who angrily contested the U.S. racial, economic, and global order.

In many ways, rap music is a way to challenge dominant forms of thinking and more established narratives about the self in the prevailing system of power and privilege. Rap music contributes critical forms of emancipatory discourse that “keeps it real” by speaking about racism, sexism, broken families, economic injustice, failing public education, police brutality, and the search for God. As the gains of the civil rights movement were being obviously rolled back some fifteen years ago, black political rappers such as Queen Latifah, Public Enemy, and KRS delivered messages of resistance, not survival. Indeed, Brooklyn-born rapper Lawrence Parker, or KRS-One, in “Take It to God,” sings a gospel rap telling listeners, “Change is gonna come, where you goin to run, but to God?”<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s, Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force, Run-DMC, and others also rapped about topics such as racism, nuclear proliferation, and apartheid.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Latino influence on rap music is ignored by established African American scholarship and overshadowed in the public eye by the

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Evelyn L. Parker (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002); and Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> See especially Wimberly and Parker, *In Search of Wisdom*; and Pinn, *Noise and Spirit*.

<sup>24</sup> KRS-One not only innovates gospel rap but understands that being a Christian also means questioning the Bible, the church, and the system of discourse that legitimates life-denying conditions of life.

<sup>25</sup> See Jeff Chang, “Stakes Is High,” in *Nation* 276, no. 2 (January 13, 2003).

African American role in hip-hop, the social facts disclose that rap music and hip-hop culture cannot be limited to the creative-force black youth and their claims on public life. Rap (hip-hop) is part of a more extensive multiracial and cross-cultural field of social practice pushing life beyond the boundaries of any singular racial reading of society. As Juan Flores notes, “Latin rap lends volatile fuel to the cause of multiculturalism in our society, at least in the challenging, inclusionary sense.”<sup>26</sup> The Latino rappers in earliest groups—such as Mean Machine, Cold Crush Brothers, Fearless Four—or individuals—such as Kid Frost, Fat Joe, Big Pun, and Mellow Man Ace—offered “an ensemble of alternative perspectives and an often divergent cultural ethos into the mainstream of U.S. social life.”<sup>27</sup> Each time they assert their genius to enunciate a way of life and thought for youth rendered invisible by society’s black-white normative gaze, Latino rappers tell us this musical form is not black cultural property.<sup>28</sup>

The first Latino rapper to go platinum was the late Christopher Rios, known to hip-hop audiences as Big Pun, who died at the age of 28 in February 2000 of a heart attack. Big Pun, a major hip-hop figure, drew between 40,000 and 60,000 people to the Ortiz Funeral Home on Westchester Avenue in the South Bronx to pay their last respects. The journalist Raquel Rivera observed that those who came to his funeral included such figures as “Fat Joe, LL Cool J, Lil’ Kim, Puff Daddy, Exibit, Mack 10 and Members of MOP . . . [and] . . . an impromptu funeral party erupted outside the funeral home, with hundreds of people dancing and singing to Pun’s music blaring from a car.”<sup>29</sup> On a street just a few blocks away from where I grew up, you can find a mural of Big Pun on the half block of Rogers Place between 163rd Street and Westchester Avenue. Big Pun knew what it was like to be a homeless kid. He worked as a doorman and loaded boxes on trucks in the South Bronx. Although he overcame many barriers and acquired material success, he continued to live in the South Bronx and produced rap music that refused to accept any kind of marginality in the hip-hop zone.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike African American rappers like KRS-One, Tupac, or Ice Cube, Latino rappers do not always consciously engage in a religiously informed exploration of life at the edges of society; yet the lyrics of artists such as

<sup>26</sup> Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 137.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> Today, rap musicians are not simply Puerto Rican and African American, as in the mostly South Bronx-based days; now you will find white middle-class, working-class rappers and rappers in other countries as well.

<sup>29</sup> Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*, 174. .

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 175–76.

Prince Whipple Whip, Mellow Man Ace, Kid Frost, Terror Squad, Fat Joe, and Big Pun challenge religious communities that fail to address the bad news situations and despair that the forgotten working poor face each day in American society. Big Pun lyrics may not give listeners an explicit gospel rap message, but the crucified reality from which he sings and the values individuals in his lyrics embody to survive raise theological questions about how to talk of a loving God in a world where street thugs and a thuggish economic system crush people daily. Tha Mexakinz, however, explicitly sing about forgiveness in a tune called “Confessions” (*Hell Don’ Pay*):

Oh Lord, all I ask is for forgiveness  
Though I live the sinful lifestyle  
Hopin that you hear me out right now . . .  
To live it’s kinda hard, in this land of temptation  
Takin it day by day but I still pray for my salvation  
Or am I facin total darkness I’m guessin  
Stuck between heaven and earth, still stressin<sup>31</sup>

The mainstream media largely represents rap music as the product of dangerous “black youths,” rather than the cultural construction of the lived experience of youth from various racial and ethnic backgrounds who decline excusing the violent, dehumanizing, and life-denying conditions found in their social reality. I applaud universities around the country—such as Berkeley, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Washington—that are offering courses on rap music, including courses devoted exclusively to Tupac Shakur.<sup>32</sup> By studying rap and hip-hop culture, theological leaders will find a way to understand the social and political issues on the mind of youth, which will enable them to take seriously how youth cultural production reflects shifts in the social, economic, and political environment.

Mainstream reporting keeps the larger public from knowing that in the last few years a hip-hop conference was held at York College in Queens, New York, and a West Coast hip-hop summit gathered African American and Latino rappers, grassroots activists, and public leaders to articulate a hip-hop political agenda: literacy campaigns in the public school, antidrug and anti-

<sup>31</sup> “Confessions (Hell Don’t Pay),” in *Tha Mexakinz Album* (1996), <http://www.lyricsbox.com/tha-mexakinz-lyrics-confessions-hell-dont-pay-1nd2pd2.html> (accessed September 14, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Hensershott, *The School of Rap*, 106.

violence campaigns, voter registration projects, and justice issues related to the prison industrial complex, capital punishment, and music censorship.<sup>33</sup>

As a popular cultural form of significance to young people, rap music imagines the inclusive reign of God by giving shape to a visibly linguistic, racial, ethnic, and cultural hip-hop community. As the vernacular language of young people, rap music can serve to help adults communicate with youth on issues of sex, AIDS, violence, poverty, racism, sexism, multiculturalism, war, politics, and spirituality. As popular culture, rap urges theological leaders to reexamine the context of liturgy and the worship experience of monolingual and ethnically homogenous congregations from the viewpoint of interethnic relations. Because rap music is a way to “sing to [God] a new song . . . with loud shouts” (Ps. 33:3), theologians, pastors, educators, and parents will find that by engaging this cultural production of youth, good news can spring forth from unexpected places.

I am aware that there are many who are asking whether or not rap and gospel, noise and the Word go together? Mark Kline Taylor reminds us that “when rappers tell alternative stories while facing police brutality or prison warehousing of the racially stigmatized poor, depicting the struggle, survival, and flourishing of oppressed communities, they conjure spiritual practices for these communities.”<sup>34</sup> The spirituality of rap folded into the notion of “keeping it real” for young people in “da world” fosters a spiritual practice not afraid to name the idols of death in the structures of society. Rap conjures the young people’s theological vision of life rooted in the age-old promises of God’s good news for all. I conclude now with a brief scriptural reflection to show how deeply biblical is the idea that something good comes from unexpected places.

#### NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM NAZARETH (JOHN 1:43–46)

In the early twentieth century, blues was viewed by “good” church folk as “music taken from the devil”; in the 1950s, the counterculture that evolved around rock and roll would also be demonized, and Tipper Gore’s *Washington Post* editorial “Hate, Rape and Rap”<sup>35</sup> suggests that few redeeming qualities are to be found in rap music. In short, the mainstream cultural discourse consistently tells us that nothing good comes from the margins. Yet these indictments of popular culture and the refusal to entertain how they can

<sup>33</sup> Manning Marable, “The Politics of Hip-Hop,” in *Worker BRC News*, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/594.html> (accessed September 14, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Mark Kline Taylor, “Bringing Noise, Conjuring Spirit,” in *Noise and Spirit*, 119.

<sup>35</sup> Tipper Gore, “Hate, Rape and Rap,” *The Washington Post* (January 8, 1990).

energize spirituality in the church and among young people reflects a kind of blindness to the insights about life found among unexpected people. Although not all forms of rap music fall into this category, much of rap music can be seen as a current answer to a question posed by a young man named Nathaniel who was invited by Philip to follow Christ: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46).

I like to remember that Jesus came from a place that nobody looked to for leadership in society. The Galilean region where Nazareth is located was populated largely by a hard-working, exploited class of people with no obvious contribution to make to intellectual and spiritual centers of power; yet, from this surprising and restless place something good did come into the world, and the world has never since been the same. Theologian Virgilio Elizondo observes, "That God had chosen to become a Galilean underscores the paradox of the incarnation, in which God becomes the despised and lowly of the world . . . God becomes the fool of the world for the sake of the world's salvation."<sup>36</sup> The barrios and inner cities that gave birth to rap music still reveal wisdom coming from marginality as well as the ongoing incarnation of God among rejected persons.

Jesus of Nazareth disclosed a God of life outside of institutional structures; he broke laws on behalf of rejected people; he shared a vision of what people should expect and achieve in life grounded in God; and he grappled with inequality, worsening economic conditions, the illness of others, interethnic alienation, the silencing of the poor, foreigners, children, women, and youth. Jesus is remembered in Scripture as the "poor, humble, enigmatic, lonely Jewish preacher who fearlessly defended the cause of the hurt of his society."<sup>37</sup> As Karl Barth observed generations ago, "We do not really know Jesus (the Jesus of the New Testament) if we do not know Him as this poor man, as . . . (if we may risk the dangerous word) partisan of the poor. . . ."<sup>38</sup> This Jesus who comes from a lousy neighborhood would not be displeased with rappers who use city streets as performance sites to name reality and claim a voice for youth who desire just social change.

I find it remarkable that many of the materially deprived and culturally despised youth who came up with rap music share biographical details with Christ. What do I mean? Well, Jesus, like them, was born to a poor woman, was raised in a valueless neighborhood, and lacked institutional credentials for speaking about God in social reality. We should also

<sup>36</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 53.

<sup>37</sup> Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 180. The German original was published in 1955.

remember that Jesus was maligned, falsely charged, arrested, and killed by the politicians and spiritual leaders of his day. In the course of his public ministry, theologians said his healing ministry came from the ruler of demons: Beelzebub. Some of the details may change for present-day rappers, but the experiences of Jesus are not too unlike those especially known by black and Latino/a youth of the inner-city communities that gave the world rap music and hip-hop culture.

I think the church can more deeply recognize the One who comes from Nazareth by walking the streets of lousy neighborhoods to shout about good news for young people and others who are denied a space to be human. In unexpected places, we can shout about how Jesus dropped lyrical bombshells to shape an alternative perception of society and to confront situations of suffering, alienation, and exploitation. I can imagine Jesus the rapper shaping a countercultural community around new social values with ethical teachings conjured by words such as: Love your enemies (Matt. 5:44, Luke 6:27); If struck on one cheek, offer the other (Matt. 5:39, Luke 6:29); Give to everyone who begs (Matt. 5:42, Luke 6:30); Judge not and you won't be judged (Matt. 7:1, Luke 6:37); First remove the log from your own eye (Matt. 7:5, Luke 6:42); Go out as lambs among wolves (Matt. 10:16, Luke 10:3); and The kingdom of God has come near to you (Matt. 10:7, Luke 10:9).

In short, not only did Jesus teach about the truth, but from the moment he left his forsaken neighborhood to begin a public ministry, his behavior challenged the world ruled by oppressive power and he spoke passionately against it.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps you will agree that there is a great deal for the church to rap about once it fully grasps what kind of good news comes out of Jesus' lousy neighborhood and those now surrounding us. It may very well be that our youth's cultural production can help us to see that the historical Jesus was "not just a thinker with ideas but a rebel with a cause . . . the embodied Galilean who lived a life of divine justice in an unjust world."<sup>40</sup> Youth ministry leaders who listen and learn from rap music will better understand how youth manage the painful social alienation they experience in society and the prophetic vision in them that sings.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 142.

<sup>40</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), xxx.

<sup>41</sup> Reggaeton is the latest musical genre to come from the streets and clubs of the Puerto Rican community. Reggaeton blends hip-hop, reggae, and salsa dance music into a unique musical and dance genre that reflects the creative genius of Latin American youth.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

O'Donovan, Oliver. *The Ways of Judgment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. 356. \$35.00.

Oliver O'Donovan, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford, has written a book in the trajectory of his earlier work on ethics and politics. Focusing on what he calls “the practice of judgment,” O'Donovan argues that the quintessential political act is to make practical judgments about what is good and right for society. As in *The Desire of the Nations* (1996), he is convinced that “the Gospel proclamation [is] . . . luminous, the political concepts needed to interpret the social and institutional realities around us obscure and elusive.” In truth, O'Donovan engages in a process of practical reasoning that is informed by, but never exclusively dependent on, biblical and theological materials.

*The Ways of Judgment* has three major sections: *political judgment*, its imperfectability and its relation to equality, freedom, mercy, and punishment; *political institutions*, including issues of representation, legitimacy, and international law; and *the church* as an eschatological community that rests on free communication rather than political judgment and whose members judge responsibly for themselves what is true about God and their lives before God.

Although the theme of judgment orients the entire book, separate chapters are not completely dependent on one another. O'Donovan gives us more a collection of thoughtful meditations than a linear argument. Broad theological themes from Scripture and church tradition help him to reframe political questions but do not fully determine his judgments about them.

His chapter on international law is illustrative. The biblical, theological materials teach us that God's kingdom ultimately calls the nations into one human community. The papacy, especially as it developed in the Middle Ages, pointed to this kingdom, reminded worldly governments of their limited, provisional nature, and impelled the formation of secular international political structures. International law can be understood as a faint but faithful reflection of God's kingdom. Yet historical experience demonstrates that international institutions have neither the same authority as national states nor the same mechanisms (such as a standing army) by which to enforce their judgments. Moreover, efforts to establish a world government could only result in denigrating people's ties to specific historical traditions and geographical places (their “home”) and would become totalitarian.

Here O'Donovan's theology illuminates aspects of the historical realities,

yet the latter have a life of their own and cannot be deduced in detail from the theology. His most trenchant insights are often on the ground, distant from the broad biblical, theological themes he lays out. He gives us not only a theology of politics but also wise humanitarian reflections informed by a variety of sources, among which Scripture and classic Christian theology are preeminently represented. What he leaves out is also striking. He knows Western political philosophical traditions inside and out but rarely cites anthropological, sociological, or cultural studies that could help us to understand the political phenomena he describes.

O'Donovan writes at a level of abstraction that will frustrate some readers. *The Ways of Nations* is nevertheless replete with fresh and arresting insights. For pastors and church leaders, two areas of discussion are especially rich: ecumenical relations, and a Christian understanding of property and wealth. In relation to the first, O'Donovan wants neither to improvise church office nor to absolutize inherited forms. He focuses instead on the "ministries of the Spirit" that *episcope* must support and shows how *diakonia* and its oversight will be different from proclamation of the Word and its oversight. In relation to property and wealth, O'Donovan brilliantly demonstrates the human capacity to manipulate things so they transmit meaning and become vehicles of human communion, and he points up the deficiencies of those parts of the Christian tradition that have renounced wealth as though it were only a temptation to individual consumption.

O'Donovan's reflections on ecclesiology reveal him at his best, not reflecting abstractly on the nature of judgment but rather making specific judgments from interesting, unexpected angles. *The Ways of Judgment* invites each of us as well into a process of political reasoning that will strengthen *koinonia* both within the church and in society.

John P. Burgess  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Wells, David F. *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. 352. \$25.00.

David Wells, Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has delivered his fourth volume in a critique of modern Western culture that began with *No Place for Truth* (1993). The thesis of *Above All Earthly Pow'rs* is that the church cannot "make peace with postmodernity and that to do so carries the liability of losing Christian authenticity."

Wells addresses his thesis to a church thoroughly enmeshed in a multi-

ethnic and multicultural context, whose largesse to the dominant culture is finally over and whose calling and identity now consist of being a missionary presence within its own culture. At the crosshairs of Wells's concern is the postmodern ethos of the church, with its preoccupation with marketing, management, packaging, and consumer satisfaction. Wells is unambiguous that the church must disentangle itself from such captivity if it is to recover a new spiritual authenticity reflecting truth, beauty, and goodness.

Wells traces the postmodern malaise of the church to the Enlightenment, which is blamed for the disappearance of God and the disappearance of human nature, and their replacement by overconfidence in human capacities, moral relativism, technocracy, the displacement of virtue by raw power, and the evils all too common in the modern world. Postmodernism stands in a love-hate relationship with the Enlightenment, although Wells ultimately sees more love than hate, particularly with regard to the understanding of the self, which is central to his concern. The Enlightenment self found confidence in reason, science, and progress, but that optimism has been thoroughly routed in postmodernism's negations of a comprehensive worldview, a compelling concept of truth, and a purpose for living.

Wells insightfully traces modern multiethnicity and religious pluralism to sociological factors, especially to migrations from the South and East into European and American societies. His statistics are illuminating. Of the 35 million immigrants to the United States between 1820 and 1964, 82 percent were European, 3 percent Asian, and 15 percent were Canadians or Latin Americans. Of those immigrants, 94 percent considered themselves Protestants, Catholics, or Jews. With the Immigration Act of 1965, however, the country opened its doors to the world and the picture was virtually reversed. The total number of immigrants to America since 1965 has been lower, about five million, but Europeans now account for only 15 percent, with the remaining 85 percent coming from around the globe and bringing with them every religion, from Animism to Zoroastrianism. The United States is now the world's most religiously diverse nation.

From a Christian perspective, there is a mission field within our borders—and also within our churches, where the spiritual quest is framed in psychological, private, and internal categories. Postmodernity is comfortable with spiritual quests because they approach the sacred through the self rather than through external authorities and because their goal is therapeutic rather than salvific. Such spirituality, according to Wells, is a modern expression of *eros*—the attempt of the autonomous soul for self-fulfillment.

Postmodernity repeats many currents of existentialism, but unlike the *angst* of a Camus or Sartre, postmoderns are remarkably nonchalant about the

*anomie* in themselves and the nihilism in culture about them. Consumption becomes a blissful substitute for the lack of ultimate meaning, and churches sadly often succumb to this misplaced yearning by becoming consumer driven. Spin-offs of postmodernism include open theism (which Wells faults for surrendering eschatology and compromising the sovereignty of God) and also the megachurch and church growth models (which he faults for allowing human interests to drive the church). Wells is particularly concerned about the modern way of “doing church”—indifferent to truth, doctrine, and discipline and feverish about marketing, feeling, ever-changing forms, and consumer satisfaction. He believes that evangelicalism is stagnant in America because it has lost its “cognitive distinction and separation from the culture”—the very characteristics, ironically, that marked the decline of the Protestant liberalism of yesteryear.

What is the antidote for the malaise of the postmodern church? Wells’s constructive theology does not equal the incisiveness of his critique of postmodernism. His answer lies in recentering the church in the Gospel of God and in recovering an authentic ecclesiastical life. These are methods with which few will disagree. But precisely what this recentering and recovery consist of, and how they may be effected, are questions that lie beyond the scope of *Above All Earthly Pow’rs*.

James R. Edwards  
Whitworth College

Edwards, O. C. Jr. *A History of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2004. Pp. 879 plus CD of source materials. \$65.00.

In recent years, several authors have attempted to write a history of preaching, taking a wide variety of approaches. In *A History of Preaching*, Edwards approaches his subject with a focus on what he calls the homiletical genealogy of English and American preaching, occupying himself very little with the preaching of such other groups as Russian Orthodoxy, the German Pietists, or the Catholic pulpit orators at the court of Louis XIV. Still, one is amazed that in a volume of 879 pages he was able to cover as much as he has. The history of preaching is indeed vast.

Part one begins with a chapter on the earliest Christian preaching, followed by a chapter on Origen and then a chapter on the three Cappadocians. He also includes chapters on John Chrysostom and a number of the other great lights of the Theodosian Revival, as well as Augustine and the Latin Fathers down to the Venerable Bede. Several chapters are given to medieval preaching, and Bernard of Clairvaux is treated extensively, as is the preaching of the friars.

Part three of Edwards's work begins with Erasmus and the "Humanists." Edwards identifies Erasmus as the watershed between the preaching of the Middle Ages and the preaching of modern times. The section also includes a chapter on the preaching of Catholic reform, but, sad to say, his studies of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin are at best superficial. Somewhat typical of Edwards's approach is the title he gives to his chapter on the English Reformation, "Upheaval in Britain."

In part four, we find several chapters on preaching in the "Dawn of Modernity." Here the field of inquiry narrows to preaching in the English-speaking world. Actually, it is in his study of English Restoration preaching that Edwards is at his best; he is quite informative about the homiletical theory of English neoclassicism. Continuing into the eighteenth century, he offers an extensive study of Wesley, evangelical preaching in Britain, and revival on the U.S. frontier. These chapters are followed by a discussion of various developments in the nineteenth century and three particularly interesting chapters on Romanticism.

Part five treats the twentieth century under the title "A Century of Change." Here the watershed, as Edwards obviously sees it, is Harry Emerson Fosdick. Among the changes Edwards chronicles is the growing importance of black preaching, the appearance of women in the pulpit, the preaching of the televangelists, and the megachurches. The final chapter is devoted to the crisis in communication, giving special attention to David Buttrick and Fred Craddock. Although our evaluations often differ, Edwards is most helpful as an observer of more recent American preaching.

The biggest problem with his history, however, is his neglect of the biblical roots of Christian preaching, especially its origins in the worship of Israel, both in the temple and the synagogue, both in the "wisdom" tradition and in the ministry of the prophets. As for the beginning of Christian preaching in the New Testament, we find it hard to follow Edwards in his refusal to find in Scripture any examples of the preaching of Jesus and the Apostles. Are the sermons reported in Luke 4, John 6, Acts 2, and Acts 17 the fabrications of a much later, ill-informed generation? Was Luke clueless about the preaching of Paul? Did not Luke hear the Apostle preach regularly? The basic problem with this book is that the author apparently assumes that we know too little about the preaching of Jesus and the Apostles even to attempt to shape our preaching on their example. That our preaching should in some sense be according to Scripture, Edwards seems to be telling us, is a vain pretension. It all sounds curiously like Archbishop Whitgift back in the reign of Elizabeth I.

Edwards seems no better informed on patristic studies than he is on

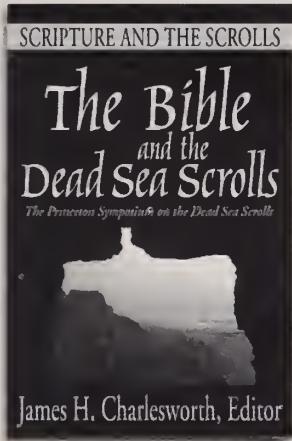
biblical studies. He hardly convinces us that it was Origen who invented expository preaching. Edwards seems to be of the opinion that expository preaching does not go back to Christ and the Apostles but is a novelty introduced by Origen. Origen, it appears, is "Origen the original."

The treatment of Chrysostom is even less convincing. As Edwards reads him, Chrysostom, it seems, was addicted to the biblical homily as well, but he really made his mark as a catechetical preacher. The study of Augustine is no more perceptive. What is particularly strange is that nothing is said about the evolution of the lectionary from the time of Augustine to that of Gregory the Great.

It is a good thing we now have several histories of preaching. We need to read them all and we need to read them critically. When read together, they can really be quite complementary. No one scholar can appreciate with equal thoroughness all the preachers the church has produced. One thing I will agree with Edwards about is that the twenty-year study in which we have both been engaged has been fun! Even more, it has been inspiring to read through the whole history of Christian preaching day by day, sermon by sermon. God has indeed been glorified by this great company of preachers.

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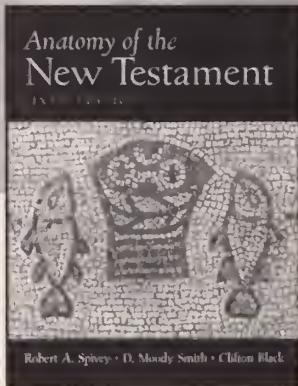


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